THIS IS A LANCER E·Z READ™ EDITION LARGER TYPE • NO-GLARE PAPER

LANCER BOOKS 73-632 60¢

Opal Street

New York in 1870 held many perils for a young girl—but Juliet Jameson braved them to find her lost brother and her dead mother's secret

June Wetherell

NEVER BEFORE IN PAPERBACK!

PUT THE PLEASURE BACK IN YOUR READING

Do your eyes get tired easily? Do you hate reading paperbacks because of the crowded gray pages?

LARGER TYPE MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

This E-Z Read edition is set in large clear type—at least 30 percent larger than the usual paperback book. It is printed on scientifically tinted non-glare paper for better contrast and less eyestrain.

All Lancer E-Z Read editions are current books carefully selected to guarantee the best in modern reading.

Opal Street

June Wetherell

LANCER BOOKS
LANCER EDITIONS
NEW YORK

A LANCER BOOK • 1967

OPAL STREET

Copyright © 1967 by June Wetherell
All rights reserved
Printed in the U.S.A.

LANCER BOOKS, INC. • 185 MADISON AVENUE • NEW YORK, N.Y. 10016

Chapter ONE

JULIET JAMESON arrived in New York City on a May morning in 1870.

Tiny, deceptively dainty in appearance, she did not look her twenty years as she stood on the curb of a West Side street near the Hudson River Railroad Station, surveying the city in delight and awe.

Above the chimney pots was a patch of blue sky. How good it looked after all those days and nights on all those cindery trains all the way across the North American continent! A familiar untrammeled sky, contrasting with the speed and noise and smell of the great rushing city.

She put her valise down beside her and stared, one hand clutching her enormous reticule, the other playing nervously with the tiny gold key that hung from a chain around her slender neck.

"There it is! There's New York!" Julie's traveling companion, Wilma Lindquist, gestured with her umbrella. " 'City of wharves and stores, city of tall façades and marble and iron! Proud and passionate city! Mettlesome and extravagant city!' Walt Whitman, my dear."

Wilma, who had shared basket lunches, cinders, smoke, and scenery on the succession of coaches across the continent, was a strong-jawed spinster who had been on a lecture tour of the West. Echoes of her talks on women's rights had filled Julie's ears as they traveled. "A wife's legal powers are practically nonexistent. . . . The right to work at most occupations is forbidden. . . . The right to enter certain places is forbidden. . . . Worst of all, women cannot vote. If they can get the vote, they will change everything."

Julie had not paid much attention. Women's rights were no concern of hers. Her brother had come to New York City six months before, and he had sent for her. Jared was only a year older, but he had looked after her ever since their parents' death eight years before. When he wrote, he had given explicit instructions about finding suitable companions for her voyage by steamer from Puget Sound to San Francisco and for the long overland trip thereafter. And she had written him, at his request, the exact train on which she would arrive.

"Well," said Miss Lindquist, lowering her um-

brella and abandoning her lectern voice and Walt Whitman, "where is that brother of yours? Do you see him anywhere?"

Julie shook her head.

"We'll wait right here. Let him find us."

The words were scarcely out of her mouth before the incredible happened. Two enormous policemen with hardhats and long beards came through the crowd, swinging their clubs, and approached the two women.

One touched his hat. "Miss Lindquist? Miss Wilma Lindquist?"

She nodded.

"I must ask you to come with us."

Wilma was pale but imperturbable. "I am afraid I can't oblige you at the moment. I am responsible for this young lady here, my traveling companion."

"You don't understand, Miss Lindquist. We are putting you under arrest. The young lady is no concern of ours."

Wilma turned to Julie. Her voice was surprisingly calm. "It's quite all right, my dear. I rather expected this. But I am worried about you."

Baffled, feeling inadequately prepared for such an astounding turn of events, Julie tried to pull her wits together and share her companion's equanimity.

"I'll be all right. Jared should be along any moment. He's never late. And I do have his address.

I can find him. You got me safely to New York. That was all you were supposed to do!"

Wilma still looked concerned, but she gave a big sigh, and a moment later the men each took one of her arms, and they escorted her into the maw of the crowd.

Julie watched her go in bewilderment. Why would they arrest such a kind lady? And why had Wilma said she'd expected it!

She stood watching the wonderful compound of hurry and noise that was New York. Fancy equipages, carts, wagons, all rattled on iron tires over the cobblestones. More horses, she was sure, than on all the Olympic peninsula back home. Men by the row of carriages snapped their whips, "Ca-ab? Ca-ab?" Newsboys bellowed incomprehensibles about Bismarck and Napoleon II. Newsboys, bootblacks, scissors-and-knives grinders, all hollered against a background of music, an accordion singing silkily to the dissonant counterpoint of the tooting and thumping of a band.

She waited for a long time, sometimes annoyed, sometimes worrying about the cause of Jared's delay, until at last she decided that it would be wiser to act instead of wait. She picked up her valise and walked over to the line of cabs.

She felt much better, shut up in the carriage, riding through the city streets, but when the cab stopped at the address she had given, she knew nothing but misgiving.

She could see it from the carriage window—a big barn of a building called The Florentine Gardens, with a poster beside the door showing half-naked women.

"What is it, Miss?" the driver leaned around to ask.

"There must be some mistake."

"This is the street and number you gave me, Miss." Then, after a moment, "Where now, Miss?"

She hesitated, and then she told him the only other address she knew in New York City.

Number 3 Opal Street had been her mother's home.

Mama had described it often—the mahogany and the silver and the china and the candelabra. Linen sheets and velvet drapes and servants to come running when you rang a bell. As they drove through the sun-dappled streets, Julie tried to remember every detail. The house was clear in her mind, but today it occurred to her that Mama never had talked about her parents and had spoken only vaguely of her brother. She had spoken his name, Kiley Mahone, deprecatingly, almost angrily, as if there had been a quarrel. Mama had eloped, Julie knew. Perhaps this uncle had objected to her marrying Pa. But that was a long time ago. Surely her mother's relatives would not turn her away.

When the carriage drew up to the curb Julie

put her face to the window. There it was, as Mama had described it—the white columns, the graceful stairway, the little elliptical dormer windows atop the four stories, like the eyes and ears of a white cat.

But something was different. Something was wrong. Mama had said it was on a beautiful street, but this was shabby and the house was crowded on either side by tall, dark, ugly office buildings.

"Number three, Miss," the driver repeated, and flicked his reins.

She must pay him and get out.

The cab clattered away and disappeared around the corner, and she was alone.

In the front window of the house she now saw a card that read, ROOMS TO LET.

The illusion that she was arriving at a place where she might belong was completely destroyed. Yet she could see the tarnished brass number 3 on the door at the top of the stairs. She knew this was the house.

Reality was as cold as the wind that whipped the shawl about her shoulders. She could not walk the streets forever, searching for Jared. She must have a place to stay. She still had a little money. If a room was for rent, she would take it.

As she picked up her valise and started up the steps she had the happy thought that if Jared were looking for her, surely, surely, one of the first places that would occur to him would be here.

She knocked for a long time before anyone answered.

The maid who opened the door looked her up and down and said, "The bellpull's over there," by way of greeting.

Julie felt herself blushing, but she was not to be intimidated by this drab little creature who looked, more than anything else, like a mop upended to dry.

"I should like to rent a room, please."

The mop nodded. "Miss Wintz seen ya from the winder. She's in the front parlor." She indicated the direction with a thumb. Julie stepped inside the hall.

The interior presented a modicum of reassurance. The wide floorboards gleamed, and the mahogany stairway stretched upward, just as Mama had described it. There was a grandfather's clock and a gilt-framed mirror above a small table, upon which letters were piled.

From the doorway to the front parlor she could see an overwhelming conglomeration—crystal chandelier; marble mantel; a picture framed in pine cones, corals, and shells; flowered wallpaper, and a strong odor of lilac perfume.

She stepped inside.

The carpet was flowered too and soft as the moss in the woods back home. Heavy drapes and lace curtains shut out most of the daylight. A little Pekingese on a pillow in front of the fireplace sat

up in quick curiosity. A woman seated with her back to the windows slowly rose to her feet.

"I am Malvina Wintz," she announced in a startingly resonant voice. "What can I do for you?"

Julie could only stare at the creature in front of her.

She was enormous, statuesque, rising like a queen from a dais. The iridescent gold color of her silk gown almost matched her spectacular peroxided hair. The outline of her figure against the light seemed to waver, an effect created by the yards of gold fringe that surrounded the garment —neckpiece, cuffs, bustle, and skirt. There were so many brooches, bracelets, necklaces, and rings scattered over her surface that the eye was momentarily deflected from her face.

She stood close to Julie, now, looking down at her.

The eyebrows above the olive-colored catlike eyes were surprisingly black, a sharp denial to the color of her hair.

The woman's eyes swallowed up the total of Julie.

How shabby I must look! thought Julie. Last year's straw bonnet, redecorated with a blue ribbon tied under her chin—how carefully she had matched that ribbon to the trim on her paisley wool dress! The hat contrasted sharply with the little boatlike hats she had seen perching on the coiffures of the New York ladies. Her poor old

shawl had seen better days, her bustle was too small, her shoes were cracked.

Miss Wintz smiled. Good grief, there was a gold tooth to match the dress.

"Well?" Miss Wintz demanded.

"I wanted to rent a room."

"Yes? Would you mind introducing yourself?" The tone was polite enough.

"Juliet Jameson."

"Looking for a job, I suppose?"

"No, I—" She broke off, annoyed with herself for even the beginning of any confidences with this awesome woman. "Why do you ask?"

"Most of my rooms are let by girls who want to go on the stage. We're right around the corner from Broadway. If you don't have a job, there's a week's rent in advance. Five dollars."

"All right." Julie closed her lips in the firm line that her family always recognized as final. Once that line was set Julie would never "fess up" to anything.

"There's only one room," the landlady said. "Top floor back."

"That will do. I shan't be here more than a week, I'm sure." She reached into the purse and handed over the money.

Miss Wintz looked as if she were about to ask some more questions, but at that moment there was the faint sound of a bell from the back of the house.

"Lizzie will show you up," Miss Wintz went on, her ear cocked in the direction of the bell.

The little dog on the pillow made its first sound, a small tentative bark.

Julie turned. She had never been able to resist an animal. "Hello, doggie."

The bundle of fur leapt from the pillow and trotted toward her, plumy tail waving.

"Gigi! Go back where you belong!"

The command from the dog's mistress left the Pekingese momentarily immobile, looking from one to the other.

Impulsively Julie stepped forward and petted the dog. She was rewarded with a frantically wagging tail and a lick of a wet tongue.

"Gigi!" Miss Wintz again commanded.

Tail between her legs, Gigi retreated.

Miss Wintz moved to the wall and pulled a long tasseled cord. There was a very loud ringing, a completely different sound from the previous tinkle.

"You'll find the maid in the hall, Miss Jameson."

Julie picked up her valise and left the room.

It was a long climb—three flights.

Lizzie told her, "You don't get no key to the outside door. You gotta ring. No matter how late. Somebody's gotta let you in." The tone implied that the somebody was probably herself. "You get water in the pitcher once a day, in the morn-

ing. That's when the chamberpots gets emptied too. You gotta make your own bed."

She slammed the door behind her.

The room seemed reasonably clean. Julie was too tired at the moment to pay much attention to the details. The eaves closed down upon her. The drapes had been drawn, an oil lamp lighted. She took off her bonnet and shoes and lay down on the mahogany four-poster to catch her breath.

She had a roof over her head. For the night. For the week.

She touched the little gold key on the chain about her neck. It had been her mother's; it was all she had left to remember Mama by. She had loved it since she had played with it as a baby on her mother's lap. How often she had asked, "What's it for, Mama?" and the only answer had been, "It's the key to my heart."

Poor Mama! There always had been something sad about her. Even as a child, Julie had realized how her mother hated the constant moves, how often she had begged their father to settle down. And yet Julie hadn't blamed Pa. Everybody had loved Pa. He was so friendly and so optimistic. Always, the next town would be better. Prospecting for gold would be better than riding a cattle range. A logging camp would mean more regular income than from prospecting. Then the next year he would hear of another mine. It had gone on all her life, since before she was born, perhaps

even before the gold rush of 1849. Time after time Mama had begged him to stay somewhere, for the children's sake, and Pa had always said it was for the children's sake that he wanted to find something better.

In the last town, Port Sumas, Pa had been clerking in the Hendersons' general store. Until the forest fire, which all but wiped Port Sumas off the map. The fire in which he and Mama lost their lives.

Her brother had gone to work for the Hendersons, then, after the store was rebuilt. She and Jared had lived with the proprietor and his wife in rooms above the store. Julie had helped with the children and taken in sewing. Together she and Jared had dreamed and planned on coming to New York City, about which Mama had talked so much.

It was quite unlike Jared not to have met her. It was a disturbing thought that she kept putting to the back of her mind, reassuring herself that he would think of this address, and look for her here.

The city noises were muted. She lay there thinking, *I should sleep for a little while*. But then there came a great clanging of bells, followed by regular *bong, bong, bongs*. She counted. Was it five o'clock? Six? She would have to learn to listen from the beginning. Now she realized that she was

not half so tired as she was hungry. Were meals served here? Nobody had mentioned them. She would wash up a bit and then find out.

There was an old cracked mirror hung above the washbasin. She moved the oil lamp closer and carefully recombed her silky black hair, drawing it smoothly back from her face and up, fastening it very firmly. Without the bonnet she did look more grown-up. The paisley wool was a bit wrinkled. Oh, dear! She hurried to open her valise. The other garments should indeed be hung up, immediately. How could she have been so careless? She dropped them across the bed and turned to locate the closet.

It was an enormous armoire, the biggest she ever had seen. The carved rosebuds on its surface had been painted pink. The strange thing was the way it had been wedged into a little indentation in the wall. It must have been very difficult to get it in there, and it would be almost impossible to remove. It did look very old. She opened it to an odor of dust and camphor, put her clothes inside, and left the doors open to air the interior.

She picked up her reticule and extinguished the oil lamp, making a mental note of where it was so that she could find it, as well as the box of matches, in the dark.

The other doors on the fourth floor were all closed. The hall was dismally dark, but there was

a faint glow from over the stair rail, and she moved down slowly, clinging to the smooth mahogany banister.

Mama walked down these very stairs, she thought. *I wonder which room was hers. She never described it. It was always the parlors or the dining room. Strange. . . .*

The big chandelier in the main hall was blazing with gaslight. She stopped in front of the gilt-framed mirror to get a good look at herself.

She would be all right. She would take care of herself until Jared found her.

There was that poem Mama had recited so often,

> Here's a sigh to those who love me
> And a smile to those who hate
> And, whatever sky's above me,
> Here's a heart for every fate!

She spoke it aloud to her reflection.

A door opened toward the back of the house, and Julie turned. For the briefest of moments she saw a man, watching. He was tall, thin as a caricature of Mephistopheles, with a large nose and such close-set eyes that she felt as if he were studying her through a telescope. She stared back. There was something peculiarly familiar about him. Then he stepped back inside the room from which he had emerged and closed the door.

Chapter TWO

JULIE HURRIED into the front parlor. Neither Miss Wintz nor the Pekingese was there. A smaller woman was standing at the window, peeking through the curtain. Before Julie spoke she took a moment to admire the green moire gown and the enormous green feather that swept up from a little hat atop some bright red hair.

"Excuse me . . ."

The woman spun around. She was a round little creature about Julie's age. She immediately crossed the room. Her sharp eyes took in Julie in a glance, and then she broke into a broad grin.

"Hello, you're new, ain't you? I'm Rose Cassidy."

"I'm Juliet Jameson."

"Say, that's some monicker. Is it real?"

"Of course! But people call me Julie."

The girl was close enough now for Julie to see the freckles, not quite hidden by face powder. The freckles were a homely addition to a low bodice and shining green-glass beads.

"I was looking for Miss Wintz," Julie went on.

"You won't find her now. Not for a while. She's occupied." The girl winked. "What did you want Malvina for?"

"I was wondering if they served meals here." I forgot to ask."

"Holy cow, no." She patted the puffs of her red hair. "Say, where do you come from? You don't talk like nobody I ever heard before."

"Washington Territory."

The girl's eyes widened. "Hey, have you ever seen President Grant?"

"Oh, not that Washington. Washington Territory."

"Where's that?"

"Way out West."

"Sure must be. Hey, sit down. Tell me about it. I get nervous as a cat waitin'. And this fellow's always late."

Julie perched on a rose-upholstered chair. The gaslight in the chandelier overhead flickered over the gaudy, cluttered room. She had no idea where to begin or what to say. At that moment all she

could feel was a wave of homesickness. She thought of her last glimpse of Port Sumas, from the steamer. The dock and the clearing like a path of light feeling its way upward, while the evergreens pressed their dark arms close. The Hendersons waving goodby.

There was nothing but kindness in Rose Cassidy's face as Julie told the story of her coming East. Jared's mysterious failure to meet her. Rose's eyes widened in curiosity and sympathy.

"What's your brother doin' in New York City?" she asked.

Julie shook her head. "I don't know. He isn't much of a letter writer. He just said he was working and had saved enough money to send for me."

"Then you're not lookin' for a job, like the rest of us! How on earth didja find your way here?"

Julie hesitated for a moment, wondering just how much she should confide in this friendly stranger.

"Well, I had an address for my brother, but it turned out to be wrong. And then I remembered my mother mentioning this one. She came from New York City. She used to live in this house."

"Honest?"

Rose didn't look too surprised. Of course, she probably thought Mama had been a roomer.

"I didn't tell Miss Wintz. I'm not sure why. I just didn't want to, somehow." She did not know

how to explain her reaction to the awesome landlady. But Rose nodded as if words were not necessary.

"I know how you feel. Me, I don't tell her nothin'."

The outside bell rang.

"Hey, that must be Ben. I'll bet he'll have some ideas. He's a newspaperman, and he gets around pretty good. And he's nice, if he is poor as a church mouse. Wait a minute."

Rose disappeared into the front hall. Julie heard a resounding kiss and then a rapid-fire stream of words of which she could catch only a few, but enough to make her realize that everything she had said was being repeated. Had she been indiscreet? She had had to tell someone; she had to find help somewhere!

They appeared arm in arm at the door to the parlor, Rose and a young man with big ears and a quizzical smile. He looked out of place in the parlor and with so gaudily dressed a person as Rose Cassidy. His hair was rough, his mustache and eyebrows were ragged, and he held a battered hat in his hand. But his eyes were nice. Very nice.

"Miss Jameson—" he began, but Rose cut him short.

"Call her Julie, for Pete's sake. This is Ben Van Kirk, of the *Bugle*. He's swell about puttin' your name in the paper."

"Oh, but I—" Julie protested.

"I know," Rose interrupted. "You don't care about that. But I do. I gotta get a job. I gotta eat. Say, Ben, can't we take her with us tonight?"

"Of course. I'm sure we can find a more pleasant place to talk."

Julie flushed. "But I'm not dressed. And I'm scarcely unpacked. Besides, I wouldn't want to intrude."

"You're all right as you are." His eyes were not the least critical.

"We ain't goin' to Delmonico's," Rose laughed. "Go get your things." From the back of a chair she picked up a cape that matched the green moire, with more green-glass beads sewn along the collar.

Julie hesitated only a moment, thinking of her old-fashioned bonnet and the old shawl.

"Oh, come on!" Rose commanded, "before the old witch gets back."

They both were smiling at Julie.

"Thank you. Oh, thank you!" She hurried past them to the stairs, before the tears of gratitude could come.

A few moments later they walked outside and down the block. When they rounded the corner Julie caught her breath with delight.

Ben smiled down at her. "This meandering serpent of a street is Broadway. Up there"—he pointed north—"Grace Church stands guard.

Down there"—he pointed south—"way down there, you can just see the spire of Saint Paul's."

The gas lamps seemed to go on for miles, and between them carriage lights of different colors bobbed up and down like spots on a caterpillar's back. There were so many people, all walking so rapidly, pushing, jostling, that she was glad to feel Ben Van Kirk's hand on her arm. Rose was clinging to his other arm; they walked three abreast, between the carriages, across Broadway. She never would have dared to cross by herself.

"Then we're not going to the Hofbrau!" Rose exclaimed.

"No, sirree. Tonight it's Desoto's."

"Oh, Ben! Gee I'm glad."

He looked at Julie. "It's not the famous broiled kidneys of Bleecker Street that lure Miss Cassidy. She hopes to see Edwin Booth or Joseph Jefferson. Miss Cassidy lives for her art."

"Oh, Ben! " Rose giggled.

Sure enough, when they entered the restaurant and were shown to a booth, Rose wanted the curtains pulled back and also chose an outside seat.

Julie was happy enough to consult the menu, to choose the kidneys rather than the rarebit that was Rose's choice, to think of nothing but food. She was ravenous.

Rose was watching the other customers. Julie felt that Ben was watching her as much as he was

Rose. Not until she had completely finished did he ask any questions.

"I have a rather garbled account of your presence," he began. "I understand you've just arrived in New York City and that you've lost a brother. What on earth brought you to Opal Street?"

"My mother used to live there."

"Oh? Was she a Babcock?" His shaggy eyebrows were lifted in surprise.

She shook her head. "No. Why?"

He touched his mustache in a thoughtful gesture. "It used to be known as the old Babcock house. It was rather famous. You've never heard of it?"

"No."

"Wealthy old gent named Wilbur Babcock owned it. Twenty-odd years ago he committed suicide, jumping out of one of the back windows. Nobody ever knew why. For a long time after, the place was boarded up. When I was a little boy it was still the scandal of the day."

"How dreadful!"

He shrugged. "Rose and I were speculating once as to which window it could have been. Rose thinks it would have been the back parlor. Now Miss Wintz's domain."

Julie gave a little shudder. "She couldn't know, could she? Or she'd never—"

"I don't think it would matter a whit to Malvina Wintz." said Ben. "She's a pretty tough-minded character."

Rose suddenly whirled around. "She ain't all bad, Ben. You know, she don't have to run a rooming house. I mean, since she quit the stage."

Julie's eyes widened. "Was she on the stage?" Was that the explanation for the strange combination of grand-lady airs and the brassy appearance?

"Oh my, yes." Rose rolled her eyes. "She was somebody, all right. And like I say, even though she's quit and got a protector"—she gave Ben a sidelong glance—"she just takes in roomers, mainly girls who want to go on the stage, and don't charge much, just to be kind. Like Ben says, she's tough-minded, but if you just butter her up a little so she'll like you, she'll treat you decent enough."

"If she likes you," Ben added. "You're lucky, Rose."

"I don't think I'm lucky," Julie said. "I'm sure she doesn't like me."

Ben looked thoughtful. "Did you tell her anything about yourself? About your mother?"

"Oh, no!"

"That's your answer, then. She's just plain curious."

"Besides, you talk like a lady," Rose put in. She wiped her mouth with her napkin and gave a small belch. "The rarebit was swell, Ben." She

giggled. "Excuse me. You talk like a lady, Julie, because you are one."

"Why, thank you!"

Mama had been a lady. She had worked very hard with her two children, always telling Jared to throw back his shoulders and lift his chin like a little gentleman. Jared, of course, had been her mother's favorite, as Julie knew, but she herself had tried her best to please Mama, brushing and brushing her fine silky hair and keeping dresses clean. "See, Mama, see?" had been her cry, and once Mama had said, "Well, you do look nice today. Pretty as I was when I was a little girl." For Mama had been pretty, and she knew it. With heavy black curls and dimples and a lovely nose. Julie had the same fresh-washed blue eyes—everyone said that—but she had her father's snub nose and stubborn chin. And such slithery hair.

For dessert came three roly-poly puddings, cups of steaming black coffee, and brandy.

"Now, Julie," Ben said over the brandy, "begin at the beginning and tell me about that brother of yours and exactly what happened." He pulled out a pipe but did not light it.

"Ben Van Kirk, reporter for the *Bugle*, speaking!" Rose wrinkled her nose at him. Then she glanced the other way. "Oh, Ben, look, there's Maria Bonfanti!"

"Feast your eyes," said Ben, "and watch her table manners while you're at it."

Rose stuck out her tongue at him, explained to Julie, "She's the leading lady in *The Black Crook!*" and continued to stare across the room at the actress.

"Julie?" Ben asked again.

She told him of Jared's coming to New York six months ago and how he had sent for her. "Everything was all right. I mean, if something happened so Jared couldn't come, I would have been all right. I had a very nice traveling companion. Only . . . it was quite dreadful. I'm embarrassed to tell you."

"Don't be. I can't help if you don't tell me everything."

"Well, she really was nice. An older woman. A lecturer. But when we got off the train, she was arrested. Two policemen came up and took her away."

Ben put down his pipe and sat up straight. "What was her name?"

"Wilma Lindquist."

"When did this happen?"

"This afternoon. Do you know her?"

"I know who she is. She's rather famous."

"Really?"

"You've done me a favor, Julie. This is news. I'll go see her first thing in the morning. It's too late now. They'd never let me in."

"But why would they arrest her?" Julie won-

dered. "She's a good person, I know. I came all the way across the country with her!"

"I'm sure she is. Just a little outspoken. Like all these women's-rights individuals. I suppose she talked your ear off about Victoria Woodhull."

"I remember the name," Julie admitted. "Who is she?"

"The leader of that gang. She puts out a newspaper. Plans to run for President of the United States. According to Victoria, 'Compared to the Roman matron in the time of the Caesars a married woman today is no more than a concubine!' " Ben laughed. "Seriously, though, nobody minds that sort of talk. But if one of those outspoken women twist Tammany's tail, even in fun, they get into trouble. Political bosses have a distaste for certain truths."

"Could I go with you to see her?" Julie asked.

He shook his head. "Better not. At least not yet. Now back to this brother of yours. Didn't you have any address at all?"

She nodded. "But I went there, and I'm sure it was wrong. The neighborhood was just awful. And I thought that if Jared looked for me anywhere, it would be on Opal Street."

Ben nodded. He considered for a moment. "And you don't know anyone else in the city? No relatives? You said your mother . . ."

"I may have an uncle. Mama did have a

brother. But I don't think they got along. They never wrote." She disliked telling so much to a stranger, kind as he seemed. Surely there was some other way to find Jared!

"What was your uncle's name?"

"Kiley Mahone."

At that Rose turned her head, and she and Ben echoed in unison, "Kiley Mahone!"

Julie looked at both their faces. For the first time since she had set foot in New York City and found no Jared, she felt a glimmer of hope.

"I know who he is and where he is," Ben said. "I think the very first step would be to take you to him."

She nodded uncertainly.

He turned to Rose. "Want to come along?"

"Sure and I do!" Rose's eyes flashed. "Are you crazy or somethin'?"

Ben gave a crooked smile.

"As I said before, Miss Cassidy lives for her art."

Whatever he means by that, thought Julie, as they got up from the table.

They walked back to Broadway and joined the milling crowds headed downtown. It was too crowded to talk, too noisy for Julie to ask where they were going. They were surrounded by all sorts of people with all sorts of faces, and bit by bit the faces grew alike, moons dancing and mur-

muring through the spring night. Outstretched palms and ragged clothes, high hats and canes and plumed bonnets, swimming in a molten hullabaloo of hooves on paving stones, music from open doors, laughter, shouts, and under it all an unidentifiable hum, as if the city itself were speaking.

They turned east from the treadmill of flickering light, onto a broad cross street, and a moment later Julie looked up and recognized the corner and the sign.

"The Florentine Gardens!" she exclaimed.

Ben looked at her curiously. "This is the place," he said.

"But . . . this is where I came this afternoon. This was supposed to be my brother's address."

Ben's voice was gentle. "Then perhaps your brother found your uncle."

A man was sloshing out buckets across the sidewalk and singing, "When you and I were young, Maggie," as if it were a dirge. Every time he dumped his bucket in the general direction of the gutter there was a stream of soggy cigar butts and stale beer.

The sign said, BEST BEER—BIGGEST RAREBITS—BEAUTIFUL GIRLS, and the girl in the picture had an amazing costume—low-cut bodice, skirt above the knees, high, tasseled boots.

Julie looked up at the gilt-and-red sign and the poster of the half-naked girl, and her heart sank.

Chapter
THREE

INSIDE, the "gardens" were more dreadful than she had anticipated. They were engulfed in the odor of smoke and alcohol. The "gardens" were a few dusty palms. There were more fire buckets than palm trees, and in the buckets were drowning a host of sad cigars. At one end of the big room was a stage for the orchestra and entertainment; at the other, an immense bar. There was a small space for dancing. But most of the room was a forest of tables where men and brightly dressed women sat drinking. Darting between the tables were the waiter girls, dressed like the one in the poster outside, numerous as identical reflections in a prism. Even their smiles seemed part of their costumes.

Rose started toward a spot near the dance floor, but Ben pulled her back toward the quietest table in sight, in a corner. Her protest was drowned out by the performer on the stage. A large woman who appeared to be nude except for a great many feathers was warbling, "I love the little rippling stream" at the top of her lungs, her voice and her body rippling vigorously.

When the singer finished and the applause died down momentarily, Ben said, "You two wait here while I seek out Kiley Mahone."

"Here?" Julie looked around at the crowded room. "Where?"

"In his office. Your uncle owns the gardens."

She sat down, stunned. No wonder Mama and her brother had not been close. What could he be like? What kind of a man could own such a noisy, vulgar place?

"Don't let your jaw fall off," Rose was saying. "Ain't you ever been in a concert hall before?"

"Concert hall?" Julie gasped.

"That's what they call it."

Now, against the clattering piano a shrill soprano was rendering, "Dear Father, drink no more."

"I wish Ben'd hurry," Rose muttered. "I'd like a lager, and those waiter girls won't give us the time of day without a gent at the table."

Julie sat very still, cold and frightened, trying to concentrate on the stage. The singer went on to

"Be Kind to Darling Sister Nell" and then abruptly launched into a rousing song called "The Velocipede Gallop." The crowd roared, stomped, and sang along with her. Some of the women at the tables had put their arms around their escorts' necks; some couples were openly kissing. Julie watched a waiter girl put down a tray full of beer mugs and then perch on the knee of a customer, while he dropped coins inside her bodice.

There wasn't a woman in the place who looked like a lady. They were all overdressed, but she was underdressed. She felt like a smudge on the whole colorful scene.

Two men came up to the table. They were properly garbed in trim short jackets, and there were gold stickpins in their cravats. They looked like gentlemen, but there were odd twinkles in the two sets of eyes.

"May we join you . . . ladies?"

Julie pulled herself up as tall as she could, feeling drabber than ever. "I'm sorry, but I am afraid we are waiting for someone."

"Oh, come on, why not?" Rose interrupted. "Move over, Julie."

Thank goodness, at that moment Ben reappeared at the table.

"I've found him, Julie."

He took her arm and led her between the tables, toward the entrance and across the hall to a

closed door. There he stopped and looked down at her.

"He's not the friendliest man in the world, Julie."

Her hand swung up to the little gold key and touched it.

"I'm afraid," she whispered.

"No need for that." His eyes were still sympathetic, but his tone was brusk. "He *is* your uncle. I'll wait at the table. All right?"

"All right."

She knocked on the door. A loud voice answered, "Come in, come in!" She gave one backward glance at Ben and opened the door.

It was a small, grubby room. The cigar smoke was even denser than it had been in the big hall. A fat man, seated at a desk, was staring at her. He did not get up. "Go on," he said. "Shut the door."

She closed it behind her and took a step toward the desk.

Kiley Mahone was bald, his face was round and red. There wasn't the faintest resemblance to Mama, unless one considered the very blue eyes. But they were anything but gentle.

"I'm . . . Juliet Jameson."

"I know." He nodded, puffing on his cigar. "I would of known anyhow. You look like your ma."

The lack of warmth in his tone was discouraging, but she tried a tentative smile. "I do?"

He did not answer. She felt his eyes traveling critically over her paisley dress and worn shoes.

"Well," he demanded, "what is it you want?"

As if she were a poor relative, come begging!

"Jared," she said. "I'm looking for my brother, Jared. Have you seen him? You must have. This was his address."

"Oh yes, I've seen him."

"You have? Where is he?" She had moved closer in her excitement, clasping her hands nervously.

"Don't get all riled up," he said shortly. "You're just like your ma."

She didn't like his tone. She didn't like his calling Mama "ma." She put her hands behind her.

"Where is Jared?"

"I don't know."

"But you said you'd seen him!"

"Look, girlie, this is it. That brother of yours turned up a while back. Dead broke. I gave him a job. After all, he's Fred Jameson's son, and Fred was a friend of mine. I gave him a try. He was a pretty good bartender."

"Bartender!" She couldn't keep the shock from her voice.

"A job's a job in this man's town. The boy was all right. Until he walked out on me."

"Where did he go?"

"I don't know. And I don't much care. I don't

like hiring shiftless people. Even if they're relatives. It's not my policy."

"But Jared wouldn't do such a thing!"

"But he did. Now I suppose you want a job. You're not bad-looking. Ever waited on tables?"

She could only stare at him in disbelief.

"I did not come looking for a job," she said quietly. "I came because I thought you could help me find Jared."

"Well, I can't. If he's got himself into trouble, I'm staying clear of it. I'm keeping my nose clean."

He smiled. It was an odd smile. He did not appear to want to be friendly. But perhaps, ordinarily, he was a friendly person, and so the smile had slipped out. Because he thought he had made himself perfectly clear? Clear? Safe? He knew, or guessed, more than he was saying.

"Something dreadful has happened to Jared, that's what I think," she told him frankly. "He's very dependable. And he never gets into trouble. And I think you know more about it than you're telling me."

From beyond the door the music boomed louder, while she waited for his reply.

That smile again. "You're a stubborn little snip," he said at last. "Just like your ma."

"I wish you'd stop calling her that!" she flared. "It sounds so common!"

He laughed. "And what did you call Ginny?"

"Mama."

"Mama, eh? Well, Ginny always was one for putting on airs."

"I don't know what you mean! Mama was a lady!"

"She was?"

"Of course she was!"

His smile was gone. "What kind of cock-and-bull story did she tell you? Ginny was the world's greatest liar."

"Don't you talk about my mother like that! She was a lady. She had perfect manners. She told me about the house she lived in and how everything was, and she always tried to teach Jared and me how to behave, like proper people. She didn't tell me much about you. She must have been ashamed."

Her vehemence faded. She took out her handkerchief and wiped her eyes and blew her nose. Kiley Mahone just sat there looking at her.

"I'm not an ogre," he said at last. "I'm just a practical man. I'd be glad to chance you on a job. With the risk that you might turn out to be another bad penny."

"Bad penny?"

"Like your ma."

"Look here, I—"

"Your ma wasn't a lady. She was a maid. She got those highfalutin ideas from the big house where she worked. You'd better forget all about

that. Or you'll get into trouble too, like your brother."

From outside there came a shriek of laughter and a crash of falling glass.

"You're lying," Julie told him. "You're lying about Jared and about my mother. I wouldn't think of working in this dreadful place. I wouldn't work for you for all the tea in China!"

She turned and ran from the room, slamming the door shut behind her.

She crossed the crowded hall as quickly as she could find her way between the tables. The waiter girls glared at her, and twice men seated at tables tried to grab hold of her. She was close to tears when she reached the corner table.

Ben jumped to his feet. "What is it, Julie? What's the matter?"

"Can we leave? Now."

"Of course."

She looked around. "Where's Rose?"

He shrugged. "Found better fish to fry."

When they stood outside, her shawl about her shoulders, her bonnet tied firmly under her chin, she found herself possessed by a sudden emptiness of mind and spirit. What could she do now? Where could she turn? The shock of meeting her uncle, his coldness, his indifference—most of all, the things he had not told her—left her feeling more helpless than ever.

Ben Van Kirk was standing there, hands on hips, looking curious, almost annoyed.

"He wasn't much help?"

She shook her head. "He had seen Jared. Jared had worked here. But he disappeared. My . . ." She hated to acknowledge the relationship. "My uncle doesn't know where Jared went. He doesn't care."

"He didn't offer to help you?"

She shook her head. "He offered me a job there." She looked back over her shoulder at the door to the Florentine Gardens. "That's all."

"Good Lord."

Away from the Gardens there were great stretches of blackness between the streetlamps. She had lost her sense of direction, and she was too tired to think clearly.

"You've been very kind," she told Ben Van Kirk. "I think I've taken more of your time than I should have already. There's nothing we can do now. Maybe I should go home."

Home. Opal Street really wasn't home at all.

"You're probably right. Sleep on it. You do look tired. Wait, I'll get a carriage."

Inside the cab he sat with his bony hands dangling over his knees. He said nothing. She wondered what he was thinking, if he were tired of the whole problem of one Juliet Jameson.

"I'm sorry," she said gently. "I did spoil your evening."

Light and shadow were exchanged so quickly that she could not see the expression on his face.

"What? Oh, nonsense. Not at all."

"But you were so busy with me that Rose—"

"Don't worry about Rose." His tone was cynicism bordering on bitterness. "Those shanty Irish girls know how to take care of themselves."

"Shanty Irish? What does that really mean?"

"People from shantytown," Ben explained. "Up north of 59th Street. They live in shacks and keep pigs. Rose has worked since she was six years old. But she finally got sick and tired of the sweatshops, with her dear old mother drinking up her wages, and she cleared out. She's got one idea —money. And she'll probably get it." But his tone was sad.

Money. Julie's thoughts were deflected back to herself. She had very little money. If she didn't find Jared within the next few days, what would she do? All she knew how to do well was to sew. When she had confided in Wilma Lindquist that she could always support herself with her needle, Wilma had told her bluntly, "There are hundreds, maybe thousands, of excellent seamstresses in New York."

"Rose loves her name in the paper," Ben was saying ruefully. "That accounts for my popularity."

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes."

She had heard the kiss in the hall. She had seen

the way Rose hung on his arm and the way they could laugh together. He was truly fond of Rose, Julie was sure, and she was sorry for him and sorry to have ruined his evening. But at the same time she felt a twinge of jealousy.

Ben Van Kirk might be poor, but he was a gentleman.

Gentleman. Lady. She remembered Kiley Mahone's cruel words.

The ride up Broadway took longer than it had taken them to walk down to the Gardens. The carriages were thick, and the unseen cobblestones clicked their protests at all the wheels, like a chorus of underground frogs.

Opal Street was a contrast of black silence.

The lamp post in front of number 3 cast a slim panel of light through the carriage windows.

"Julie," he said, "you didn't really tell me what your uncle said about your brother. Did he give you any clue at all?"

She shook her head. "No. He was most unpleasant. He'd given Jared a job. And Jared had just disappeared. He accused Jared of running out on him. He said Jared had got into trouble. And oh, Mr. Van Kirk—"

"Good grief, can't you call me Ben?"

"Ben. Ben, if you knew my brother, you'd know he couldn't do anything like that. Jared's worked since he was thirteen. He's always on time or ahead of time, and he did everything, just

everything at Henderson's store. And Mr. Henderson trusted him with the cash register, and he used to be the one to take the money to the bank, and everybody in Port Sumas trusted him."

"I'm sure they did. I didn't want to say anything about a relative of yours, but Kiley Mahone does not have the world's best reputation."

"I didn't believe a word he said. Not a word!"

"And of course he's being careful. A businessman in a business like the Florentine Gardens is very careful. It costs money to buy off the police."

"The police?"

"This was a quiet night at the Gardens. There have been some pretty nasty fights. Involving prominent people. Your uncle runs a rather notorious dive."

"I wish he weren't my uncle!"

He touched her hand. "But he is," he said quietly. "You've got to face it." Then he added, "I'll wager he didn't tell you the whole truth. Knowing his reputation, I'll bet a nickel he's hiding something. Best you stay clear of him."

"Don't worry, I shall!" And then, surprising herself, she burst into tears.

Ben let her cry for a moment before he spoke. "Julie, it's been a most difficult day for you. There's nothing more to be done tonight. Why don't you just try to get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow's another day."

"Tomorrow?" It was all question. What could she do tomorrow?

"Tomorrow, we'll think of something. Why don't you come down and have lunch with me? Here's my card. It's on Printing House Square. Think you can find it?"

"Oh yes." *I'll find it,* she thought, *no matter how difficult it is.* "Thank you. For everything."

"Don't thank me yet. I haven't done much but lead you to the wrong man."

"And dinner."

"Miss Jameson, kindly proceed to your residence. And bed. Before you start crying again."

But he had his quirky smile when he said it.

He waited by the carriage while she climbed the steps and rang the bell. The frowzy maid appeared, and the door opened. Julie heard the hooves and the wheels moving over the cobblestones as the carriage was swallowed up in the night.

The hall chandelier was no longer lighted. There was a small lamp on the hall table and another on each landing of the long staircase. Lizzie opened a door and scurried to the cellar without a word of greeting or good night.

The doors to both parlors were closed. Julie looked toward the back one, remembering the story of the man who had jumped out the window, and hurried on. On each landing there was a small light.

The second and third flights of stairs were narrower and darker. The creaking sound of her footsteps seemed louder than by day.

She found her own room and bolted the door behind her before searching for the lamp. She lit it and drew back from the enormous shadows it cast. The ceiling on this floor was low, in contrast to those of the parlor and hall. The dormers crowded in upon her. She felt as if she were inside a box and someone was pushing the lid down tightly.

She went over to the window and pulled aside the drapes, but there was nothing to be seen but the dark outline of the taller buildings and her blurred reflection in the glass. She drew the curtains closed again and undressed.

Tired as she was, when she lay down she could not sleep. It had been more than a difficult day. It had been the most confusing and frightening day in her whole life.

Her uncle's words kept coming back to her. He was lying; of course he was lying. Yet what he had said was disturbing. No one had ever spoken unkindly of her mother before. Gentle, gracious Mama had been the symbol of all Julie's ambitions. That anyone should suggest that Mama could have been anything but what Julie knew she had been was blasphemy. It was untrue, she knew it was untrue, but it hurt.

Opal Street had seemed a quiet place. But now

she was beginning to hear noises. More than the occasional ring of the downstairs bell or the creak of the stairs as other roomers came home. More than the ringing of bells and bonging of time from that church somewhere in the neighborhood. Noises she could not comprehend came and went—bursts of music, a roar like distant thunder, and a rumbling, incomprehensible conversation that seemed to emanate from the armoire in the corner.

She began to doze fitfully, tossing and turning.

Suddenly, from the direction of the armoire, there was an angry scream, a pitiful whimpering, abrupt heavy silence.

She put her head under the pillow and slept at last.

Chapter
FOUR

THE MORNING SUNLIGHT slipped in bars through the closed shutters and revealed much more than she had been able to see the night before. It was a room of assembled leftovers. The mahogany bedposts were scratched, the tasseled embroidered bedspread threadbare, the framed scroll on the wall declaring GOD BLESS OUR HOME fly-specked. On the rickety stand beside her bed was a pincushion, set on a little china dish with gold letters, SOUVENIR OF HOBOKEN. Where on earth was that?

The sounds that had awakened her had been familiar. Now she realized that the crowing of roosters and the whinnying of horses were part of Washington Territory and home. And she had distinctly heard them.

She climbed down from the bed and went to the window and opened the shutters.

The small back yard far below had been split down the middle by a brick wall. On one side there was indeed a chicken coop and a tethered horse and a privy, the contents of which a boy was emptying into a cart. The other half of the yard had been made into a tiny garden. She could see two stunted trees and pink and red splashes of potted geraniums. There was no sun in the garden—the sunlight lavished its golden rays on the tops of the ugly surrounding buildings. Bricks and bricks. The only break was one funny, crooked chimneypot. She was reminded of pictures she had seen of prison yards.

Again she thought of the man who had committed suicide, and she drew back momentarily from the window.

The confusing events of the day before scampered through her head as she filled the washbowl and began preparations to meet the morning.

The house and its owner were unfriendly. Rose Cassidy was a strange, unpredictable creature. But she had led Julie to Ben Van Kirk. And Ben Van Kirk would help her to find Jared. And then everything would be all right.

The thought of Ben restored her natural optimism. She opened the musty armoire to choose what to wear. Her wardrobe was limited—she had made the few garments herself—but certainly

she must find something else, not too wrinkled. The paisley wool was in dreadful condition.

She took a skirt and jacket back to the window to examine them in better light. A sound from below caught her attention, and she looked down into the garden.

A small brown movement. The Pekingese—tiny from this height. And Miss Wintz, almost dainty from such a distance. The dog was racing back and forth, and Miss Wintz was calling to her. Gigi, in happy morning abandonment, was paying no attention. Around and around she circled, until she crashed into one of the flowerpots and knocked it over and stopped in fright.

Julie pushed the window open a crack.

Miss Wintz bent and cuffed the dog on its ear, and involuntarily Julie cried, "Oh, no!"

Miss Wintz looked up.

The anger that had been directed toward the dog lost none of its venom. The landlady straightened and stared at Julie as the puppy whimpered, and the three flights' distance seemed nothing.

Julie drew back from the window. The blue-and-green-plaid skirt and the little green jacket were in her hands. She would take no longer to decide such trvialities. She would get dressed and get out.

Opal Street was empty and dusty. Around the corner, Broadway was more alive, a wondrous

compound of hurry and noise. She looked up and down the block but could discover no restaurant until she spotted, across the street, a stand reminiscent of a booth at a country carnival. At the first pause in the traffic, she negotiated the crossing.

The man in the booth could give her a mug of coffee and a butter cake swathed in grease.

She stood there eating it, piqued by the scene in front of her, the carts and carriages and hurrying people. Directly across the street, near the corner from which she had come, there was a building topped with red and yellow banners and a big sign, THEATRE MARCEAU.

They had passed theaters the night before, but there had been no chance to examine one closely. She decided that as soon as she had finished her coffee she would go back across the street and read the posters, before starting off on her journey to Printing House Square.

The scanty garments of the waitresses in the Florentine Gardens had been shocking, but they seemed modest in retrospect, compared with the sketches on the posters advertising "The Beauties from Buttercup Creek." Never had Julie seen such low-cut necklines, such bulging bosoms. From there downward most of the costumes were skintight with provocative tassels and rosettes distributed at strategic points. Like living Christmas

trees, Julie decided. All the girls had similar pretty faces with half-lowered eyelids and pouting lips.

There were sketches of men, too, most of them in rumpled, ill-fitting clothes and funny hats set at angles on their heads. "Final performance tonight: last chance to see what happens when fifty flirty girlies come out of the piney woods and visit the big city."

On the opposite side of the theater entrance there was a different poster.

> WANTED: YOUNG LADIES FOR THE CHORUS! Terpsichorean training and cultivated singing voices preferable but not necessary if willing to learn, and possessed of well-rounded figure and pleasant mien.

Julie, who had been a good student during her brief schooling, was puzzling over the sentence structure, when a voice asked, "Looking for a job?"

"Oh, no, I . . ." She turned around. She had not heard the man approaching, and now she saw one of the theater doors swinging. He must have come from inside.

He was very tall, with iron-gray hair and neatly trimmed mustache and goatee. *Distinguished* was the first word to come into Julie's mind. Then she recognized him. He was the same man who

had stared at her from the back of the dark hall the night before. She backed away, her fingers on the little gold key at her throat.

"My apologies if I startled you. I do have an interest in the Theatre Marceau, and I naturally assumed you were a candidate for employment. Truly, aren't you?"

Mama had taught her never to talk to strangers, but she felt compelled to set this fellow straight. "I was just reading the poster." She spoke with dignity. "Certainly I am not interested in employment!"

He looked her over from the top of her bonnet, past the tendrils of hair that forever slipped from the knot and lay in a childlike fashion over her high collar, past the curve of the jacket and modest bustle, to her tired old shoes. *He can tell I'm poor*, she thought angrily.

"You should be interested, young lady. You are very attractive."

"But I can neither sing nor dance!"

He pointed at the poster with his cane. "Those qualities are not necessary."

He was not completely a masher, she was sure. Curiosity seemed to account for a good deal of his attitude. But there was something familiar and yet disturbing in his expression.

She turned her back on him and walked quickly away, toward the corner. Across the street she saw a policeman and ran toward him, dodging

between the carriages and ignoring the warning cries from the drivers.

"Can I help you, young lady?"

She must start being careful of her money, not squander it on carriages.

"Please, sir, can you tell me where to get the right horse car for Printing House Square?"

"Of course. Follow me."

She had seen the horse cars, hesitating on corners like huge gaudy birds lighting on branches too near to people. The horses' ears always quivered and their feet pranced about while people jumped aboard.

"Have your nickel ready," the policeman advised her. "And get off at Chambers Street."

When the proper horse car arrived she watched two men leap aboard, then a lady stepped up, holding her skirt daintily an inch above her boot tops. It was difficult for Julie, but she managed to climb in. The car was immediately underway, jarring and jolting like a rowboat on a choppy sea. *Clang, clang, clang!* the driver pulled the bell.

Julie stumbled forward, toward one side, then the other. There were fifteen or twenty people, standing and sitting and leaning like sacks of grain. Julie dropped her nickel and had to bend down and scurry on the straw-covered floor to find it.

The horse car was like a crowded and pretty little room, with a pot-bellied stove and a flower-

painted ceiling, catapulting through a city that seemed to stretch forever. Yet as she stood there in that tangle of arms and legs, she felt alone. Her tentative smile brought no response from the other passengers. She bent and peered around umbrellas, walking sticks, reticules, and bustles, to catch glimpses of streets and bright new brick and brownstone and awnings that dappled the sidewalk with shadows, and people, people, people, a great undergrowth of humanity.

As they clattered south toward Chambers Street, she puzzled over the strange tall man. Who was he? He was polite, obviously a gentleman, but she was not sure she should trust him. She never had encountered such people before as that man or Malvina Wintz. What perplexed her most of all was their cold curiosity and almost dislike of her. Julie was a friendly girl, and until now most people had responded in kind.

At intervals the driver's voice was flung out like a banner across the babble as he pronounced the cross streets. She was glad that she could understand "Chambers Street!" and that others were getting off at the same spot, shouting, "Off! Off!" as if they were playing some rough game.

When she stepped down it was into a completely different world. There were more wagons, some loaded with casks labeled BEER, others with sides of pork or baskets of peas and beans. Peo-

ple were not so fancily dressed as uptown, and they had a happy, busy look about them.

She had seen sketches of City Hall in magazines, and it had always had a dignified, aloof appearance. The park at its feet had seemed enormous, and the figures of the people dainty and proper and spaced apart. But the park was a skimpy little affair in the midst of several congested sections of the city. At the south end the new post office was a tangle of construction. To the east were the girders of the great bridge they were putting across the river to Brooklyn.

Following the policeman's directions, she came to the corner of Frankfort and Park Row and was plunged into a sea of peddlers, auctioneers, sidewalk salesmen, with everything from telescopes, scales, and machines to test lung power, to kittens and birds. Boys screamed, "Black your boots? Black your boots?" or flapped the latest newspapers in the breeze. The sidewalks were cluttered with stands selling peanuts, lemonade, clams.

Printing House Square was one of the corners, the last one, after she had circled the park. She had to ask another policeman directions before she located the office of the *Bugle*, on an alley off Nassau Street. The entrance was upstairs.

She hurried up the steps, her anxiety to find Ben Van Kirk growing as she climbed. What if

he weren't there? She had received many curious glances as she had gone around City Hall Park.

The door was ajar, and she walked in.

It was a large, low-ceilinged room, cluttered with tables and chairs and one pot-bellied stove. There was a heavy pall of cigar and pipe smoke, but the stuffy air was enlivened by the acrid odor of ink. Men were seated at the tables, most of them without their jackets but still wearing their hats, all bent over scribbling or weilding big scissors and dipping into pastepots. The floor shook, as if some monster imprisoned below were trying to escape.

Nobody had noticed her come in. She stood staring and listening to the rumble from below and the ringing of bells and shouts of "Boy! Copy boy! Where the devil are you?"

At last a man nearby who had been sitting with his feet up on a table reading a newspaper put his paper down and saw her, jumped to his feet, pulled off his hat.

"What can I do for you?"

"Mr. Van Kirk, please."

"Ben!" he bellowed.

And there came Ben from the back of the room. "Julie! You found us. I was beginning to get worried."

He had her by the arm, and all was well. She was being introduced, over and over again, and

they all looked surprised but were exceedingly polite.

"You've never been in a newspaper office before?" he asked when they had finished the rounds.

She shook her head, wide-eyed.

He explained then that the noise from below was the printing press, and he pointed out the intricate entanglement of speaking pipes, copy boxes, and bells running from the ceiling through the center of the room, all part of the perpendicular viaduct for communications with the other floor, where the composing room adjoined the presses. Then he said, "We can't talk here. Come on, the editor isn't in, we'll use his office."

It was quiet behind the closed door. There were two comfortable chairs. She was grateful to sit down.

"Poor Julie, you do look bewildered. How are you today, really?"

"Oh, I'm all right." She smiled. It was so nice to smile at someone and have him smile back. "I don't like Opal Street, though. Nor Miss Wintz."

"It's no place for a nice young girl like you."

She blushed.

"Miss Lindquist agrees."

"Miss Lindquist? Wilma? You've seen her?"

He nodded. "This morning, in her cell. She is most worried about you and quite upset that she

can't help you. She asked me to do everything I could."

"What happened? Why was she arrested?"

"I think she expected it. These women's-rights women always expect it."

"But what did she do?"

He shrugged. "Oh, she just treaded on the toes of a very important Tammany bigwig. She suggested that he gave his mistress privileges he wouldn't give his wife."

"Mistress?" Julie's blue eyes widened. "I've only read about mistresses in stories. I didn't know they were real."

His shaggy brows lifted in amusement. "Oh, they are real, all right. Most people speak of them in more euphemistic language. Wilma Lindquist is quite blunt. I do approve of honesty, but I must say there are times—especially when dealing with Tammany men, or any politicians—when subtlety should prevail. Unless you have a fancy for jail cells."

He reached into his pocket, brought out his pipe, filled it, and lit it. Then he went on, "Of course it's wrong. Putting people in jail for telling the truth."

"Can't something be done?" Julie asked.

"You haven't been reading the *Daily Bugle*."

"I'm afraid not."

"I know. You only arrived in town yesterday. The *Bugle*'s doing a series of exposes. There's a lot of corruption in this city. A lot of unknown

corruption too. For instance, Miss Wintz's protector—Rose's euphemism—might just be a certain gentleman who plans to run for mayor in the fall. Rose is keeping her ears open for me. In return for which I put her name in the paper every chance I get. It's a kind of business pact."

He concentrated on his pipe. *Business pact!* thought Julie, remembering the way he had greeted Rose with a kiss the night before.

He looked up. "That house is no place for you, Julie. Why did you go there in the first place? Just because you remembered a street address where your mother once had lived? I mean, why did you stay, after you saw the kind of place it is?"

"I thought Jared would remember too and try to find me there. I told you that."

"You thought. You don't think so now?"

She shook her head. "Now I'm not so sure." She was remembering her uncle Kiley Mahone's words. The feeling of being lost and alone and helpless again came over her. She was silent, her fingers on the little gold key, her eyes downcast.

"Come on, Julie," Ben said. "It's lunchtime. Let's eat. And then talk."

He took her back around to Printing House Square and Hitchcock's. "Best beef and beans in the world," he told her. It was a clean, crowded, noisy place, full of men, with a long bar down one side and a lunch counter on the other, which she

could only glimpse from the restaurant proper. Inside a curtained booth, with a mug of foaming lager in her hand, she began to relax a little. And she was hungry. That greasy cake seemed a long while ago.

He finally asked again, "Why don't you think, now, that your brother will come to Opal Street?"

She told him, "Because I think he believed my uncle."

"Believed what?"

She bit her lip. "I couldn't tell you last night. I was so shocked and angry."

He reached across the table to pat her hand. "If I'm going to help you, Julie, you'll have to trust me."

It was true. Until she found Jared, she needed help. And perhaps this young man who knew so much about the big city could help her find her brother.

"My uncle said some pretty cruel things about my mother. He called her a liar. And a bad penny. He said she never lived on Opal Street but just worked there as a maid."

"Poor Julie. That must have been a shock."

"I still don't believe it!" she protested. "My mother was a real lady. I know it. I just know it. Uncle Kiley is lying, but I don't know why. But I mean to find out!"

His eyebrows held concern, but he said, almost

under his breath, "Good for you." Then he added, "How?"

"First off, I've got to find Jared."

"Right. Look, here's the beef and beans. I've always felt that a person can think better on a full stomach."

Over coffee, she said shyly, "You must know an awful lot about New York City, working on a newspaper."

"Also I've lived here all my life," he added.

"Really, Ben?"

"Really. And I was always a great one for getting around. At a tender age I was eluding nursie and hightailing it all over town."

"You had a nurse?"

"That was before the war. Before my father lost his shirt trying to save the glorious Confederacy. A misguided idealist was my father. Not a hard-hearted practical man, like myself."

She smiled. "You're not."

"Not when you smile at me like that, Miss Jameson."

He drained his coffee cup in a gulp and pushed it aside.

How am I—how are we," she amended, "going to find Jared?"

He was lighting his pipe. Then he said, "I've made a start."

"You have?" She leaned forward eagerly.

"I checked the police this morning. Sent runners to the stations I couldn't get to."

"And?"

"Nothing."

Her heart sank.

"It was just a start, Julie. And one thing I should have asked last night, if I were a proper detective, was for a description of him. Does he look anything like you?"

She shook her head. "Not really. Oh, he's got the same eyes, I guess. But he's very tall and thin, and he has a real nose."

"What do you call yours?"

"Oh, you know what I mean. And he's good-looking. But he doesn't . . ." How to describe Jared's peculiar walk? He grew too fast, everyone said. His hands and his feet were so far away from the rest of him. "He takes long steps. I was forever running to catch up with him when we were children. But he sort of slouches. You know?"

"How old is he?"

"Twenty-one. And he's quite serious. About everything. He's had to be, taking care of me, like he promised Mama."

Ben nodded. "He sounds like someone who could look out for himself."

"Oh, yes. He always could. What's the matter? Why do you look like that?"

"I was just thinking. He might have made an enemy."

"But how?"

"Good, serious people frequently do. This is a wicked city, Julie. A rough city, for the pure in heart."

A moment later he pulled out his watch.

"Holy cow, I've got to get back to work. Sure you can find your way back uptown again if I put you on the right horse car?"

"Of course. But what are we going to do?"

"You go home and wait. I'll get word to you as soon as I can."

"But what are you going to do?"

"The next step is to check the hospitals."

"Oh, no!"

"It's the next step, Julie. I'll also give his description to the police. And I'll put a notice in the paper."

She was trembling, but she pulled her shoulders very straight and hoped she at least looked brave. She put out her hand. "Thank you so very much."

"It's been a pleasure." His words were almost formal, and the past tense made her wonder when and if she would see him again, but his handclasp was reassuringly firm.

"I have a real story from Wilma Lindquist, thanks to you, Julie." He hesitated. His voice turned gruffly shy. "Be careful, now."

He walked her to the horse car, but after she was aboard and peeked out the window, there was no sign of him.

As the buildings skimmed past the windows of the horse car the hugeness of the city again impressed her, and at each corner where they stopped she watched the sea of faces passing and thought, *Jared is somewhere among all these people.*

The six months since he had left Port Sumas now seemed like a very long time indeed. She had grown up a lot, learned to make her own decisions about so many things, really taken care of herself. But it had all been temporary, doing this or that until Jared sent for her, hoping that Jared would approve of each little trivia.

For the last twenty-four hours her whole thought had been to find Jared. Now, when Ben Van Kirk spoke that one word, "hospitals," she had to face the idea that something really dreadful might have happened to her brother. That she might find herself truly alone.

And what would I do? I don't have enough money to go back to Port Sumas. I don't have enough money to last more than a week. I would have to go to work. But not for uncle Kiley Mahone. Never. Nor would I try to go on the stage. What would Mama have thought?

Oh, dear. Mama.

She got off the horse car about six blocks too soon, confused by the sight of a building she thought she recognized, and she was tired by the time she turned off Broadway onto Opal Street.

Strange, what distances she could walk in the woods back home and how tired the same two feet could get from the cobblestones. She was sure her shoes would wear out in no time at all.

Miss Wintz was at the front window.

Chapter
FIVE

JULIE CLIMBED the steps and rang the bell. When the mop-headed maid opened the door, she announced, "Miss Wintz wants to see yer in the parlor."

Julie sighed, straightened her bonnet, and went in.

"Good afternoon." Miss Wintz's voice was strangely modulated. "Please sit down. You look tired."

"I am a little tired."

"Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Oh, no, thank you." Tea sounded delightful, but she had no desire to stay any longer than necessary.

"Please sit down anyhow. I had to rush off so

quickly yesterday, I must apologize. We didn't have a chance to get acquainted."

Miss Wintz was all smiles. The gold tooth glinted. Today she was resplendent in purple taffeta embroidered with velvet leaves, and she was splattered again with jewelry that tinkled as she gestured.

Julie perched on the nearest chair, apprehensive despite the other's friendly tone. Gigi was on the cushion by the fireplace. Julie was sure the friendly wag of her tail was genuine. She smiled at the Pekingese. "Hello, Gigi."

"Gigi, stay!" The abrupt change of tone made Julie jump. But after scolding the dog, Miss Wintz turned her head and said in the gentlest of tones, "Untie your bonnet, my dear. And tell me, what have you been doing with yourself today? Seeing the city?"

"Yes." She did not touch her bonnet.

"All by yourself? My, but you are a brave little thing."

"A friend took me to lunch." Julie tried to sound casual.

"How nice! Then you do have friends in the city?"

"A few." I won't tell her Ben's name. I won't. Nor who he is.

"Where do you come from, my dear?" Miss Wintz was asking. "Your accent is definitely Western. One of the young ladies who recently stayed

here was from Ohio, and she sounded like you do."

Of course, the mention of Washington Territory brought surprise and curiosity again. The black brows shot up and became two question marks.

"All by yourself? All the way across the continent?"

"I had a traveling companion." *Another name I will not mention.*

"May I ask why?"

Julie had felt from the first moment she walked into the room yesterday that this woman did not like her. Ben had said it was only curiosity. But it was more than that. It was an unfriendly curiosity that Julie resented. She was determined not to mention Jared, not to tell Miss Wintz any more than she could help.

"Oh, I've always wanted to come to New York City," she said as calmly as she could. "Doesn't everybody?"

Apparently undaunted, Miss Wintz pursued, "But why did you come to this house?"

Julie looked her straight in the eye. "It's a beautiful old building."

"You didn't just walk past. You arrived in a carriage."

Julie wasn't used to lying, but she tried. "A policeman suggested it."

"A policeman!"

"Oh, they're very kind."

Malvina Wintz played with her bracelets, apparently thinking of what her next question would be. But Julie was not going to give her the chance to ask it. She got to her feet.

"I really must be running along." Impulsively she found an excuse. "I want to speak to Miss Cassidy. Do you know if she's in?"

"I believe she is," Miss Wintz said slowly. "So you know her?"

Now she's going to ask Rose questions about me, Julie thought. *Oh dear, I must warn Rose. I really must see her.*

"Oh yes, we've met. She too has been most kind." Julie stopped in the doorway. "Good afternoon," she said politely.

Malvina Wintz's face was a mixture of curiosity and exasperation. Julie hurried across the hall and up the stairs.

Now that she was about to knock on Rose's door, she felt some trepidation. Early the evening before, Rose had told her that her room was next to Julie's and invited her to drop in some time. But what if Rose were angry with her for having gone with them to dinner, for Ben's having escorted Julie home? Rose might very well consider Ben Van Kirk her property.

Still, she had to talk to someone. She couldn't just sit alone and brood, waiting for word from Ben.

When Rose asked, "Who is it?" and she answered, "Julie," Rose called out in the friendliest of tones, "Come on in!"

Rose's room was toward the center of the house, and its only window was blocked off by the building next door. There was a skylight, but the room was full of shadows, as if it were already evening.

There were a brass bed and a rickety chair, a cluttered bureau, a smudgy mirror with bits of paper and photographs stuck around the edges. One corner of the room was screened off by a makeshift curtain that looked as if it were a ragged lace tablecloth. The whole room gave the effect of a lady's mammoth pocketbook, turned inside-out.

Rose was sitting on the floor in the middle of the room wearing nothing but her shift, her lap full of a mass of shimmering silver material.

"Julie, I'm havin' the devil of a time. Can you sew?"

"Oh, yes."

"Praise be! Take off your bonnet and come here."

Julie took off her bonnet and laid it on the one chair.

"Come on down," Rose commanded. "The floor's clean enough. I swept it."

Julie sat down beside her. She touched the silver material. "What is it?"

"It's my costume! I got myself a job!" Rose grinned. With her red hair flying every which way

and with no powder on her freckled face, she looked like a tomboy, squatted on the ground for a game of mumblety-peg.

"How nice!" was all Julie could think of to say.

"Nice! Holy cow, it's more than that. I can pay my rent next week and maybe get some clothes and be able to eat without always havin' to find me a gent. Thank you very much, Miss Jameson for takin' Ben off my hands last night. 'Member those gents that sat down at the table? Well, they took me uptown to the Faro Club, where the real moneybags are. And I met me the right one, and he said to come around for tryouts today and I did. The tryouts was for the new show, but one of the gals in the show that's closin' tonight got sick and got carted off to the hospital, and I'm replacin'. I don't get to do much, but I'm out front alla time standin' around, and I got my own dressin' room, least for now."

Julie was remembering the poster and the costumes. She looked down at the silver material. Was Rose going to be as naked as the girls in the picture?

"Is it the theater around the corner?" she asked.

"That's the one. I'm gonna be a Beauty from Buttercup Creek." Rose giggled. "If I can get this here costume to fit. The other gal was much biggern' me. And Jehosophat, you can't have it loose!"

"May I see it?" Julie asked. "Maybe I can make it fit."

"Honest, you can sew?"

"I make all my clothes."

It was so good to be able to help someone, instead of continually asking and taking others' help. She turned the costume inside-out, in order to pin it around Rose, and when she explained what she was about to do, to her astonishment Rose pulled off her shift and said, "It's gotta fit skintight."

When that embarrassing process was finished, and Julie sat down to sew, Rose asked, "And now tell me about yourself. Any luck finding that brother of yours? What about your uncle, old Kiley Mahone?"

Julie brought her up to date, again trying to be reticent about what Uncle Kiley had said about her mother. But Rose led her into it when she went back to the subject of her uncle.

"Dollars to doughnuts he knows where your brother is. You maybe shoulda stuck it out, taken a job with him."

"Oh, but I couldn't! Not after what he said."

So the rest of the story spilled out. Rose didn't look very sympathetic. "You're a funny one," was her comment. "The less I see or hear of my old lady, the better."

The mood of companionship wavered. Julie sewed in silence, and when she was finished, Rose

again stripped down and tried on the costume and babbled appreciation. It did fit, almost too well. Julie was sure that Rose would be the equal of any of the girls on the poster.

"Hey, Julie, thanks a million. What can I do for you, now? I sure owe you somepm."

"Of course you don't. I was glad to help."

Rose looked thoughtful. Then she said, "I've got it! You want to see the show tonight?"

"Oh, I'd love to." Her enthusiasm faded quickly. "I don't have the proper clothes ready. I couldn't."

"Oh, I meant backstage. I can find you a spot. You can pretend to be my dressing woman." She winked.

"That would be wonderful."

When the clock outside bonged six, they jumped, surprised that it was so late, and Rose invited her to have supper.

"Supper?"

"Not real supper. We can really eat later. But a bite here."

"Here?"

The lace tablecloth curtain hid a miniature kitchen.

They had fried eggs and some very dry bread, and tea, and it was so pleasant that Julie again felt a glow of friendship and again dared to confide.

"Rose, please don't tell Miss Wintz anything I told you."

"I know when to keep my mouth shut."

"She doesn't like me."

Rose nodded. "She don't really like me, neither."

They were sitting on the floor with the plates on their laps and the cups of tea beside them. Julie forgot caution. She remembered Ben and his "business pact" with Rose. She plunged on.

"Rose, who is that real tall man?"

Rose drew back, her eyes narrowing. "What tall man?"

"I saw him in the hall last night. And this morning outside the theater."

But the other girl had picked up her plate and cup and was getting to her feet. "Look, Julie, I've got to clean up now. I'll take the costume over to the theater to change, of course. But if you want to come with me, you'd better get ready too."

For a moment, while she was back in her room washing her face and hands, Julie wondered if she should stay here, in case Ben came or sent some word of news of Jared. Was it foolish to go off to the theater with Rose? She took her shawl and her purse, turned off the gas lamp, and started down the hall to talk to Rose about it.

She opened her door and almost walked straight into Miss Wintz.

"Going out?" The smile was a caricature.

Julie nodded, too startled to think of a reply.

Miss Wintz lifted her nose. "I thought I smelled food. Cooking in your room is strictly against the rules. If you had been cooking, I could ask you to leave at once."

The woman loomed large in the low-ceilinged dark hall, but Julie stood her ground.

"I have not been cooking. But even if I had, I have paid a week's rent."

There was no smile now on the landlady's face. "This is my house," she said with arrogant pride. "When I ask you to leave, you will leave."

Julie walked past her toward the door to Rose's room.

Rose was unperturbed.

"She wouldn't dare kick you out. You could call a copper on her. She don't want no coppers around. Forget it."

Julie had been going to suggest that she stay, in case Ben came, but she didn't like to say that to Rose, and besides, she didn't want to just sit. Miss Wintz might return.

"C'mon, kid, let's blow. Time we come back she'll be in bed."

Julie was glad to go down the stairs beside Rose and to shut the door of the house behind them.

Around the corner Broadway was magic again.

The banners outside the Theatre Marceau were fine, brave things against the night sky. They were

flying horizontally in the breeze, illuminated by torch lights. It was like a picture of the entrance to a medieval tournament.

As they turned in to the dark alley to the stage entrance, Julie exclaimed, "How close it is! It must be just behind number 3 Opal Street!"

"Almost," said Rose. "Nights I been home I can hear them clapping sometimes and little bits of music."

"That's what I heard then last night! I mean part of what I heard." Julie wouldn't mind the theater noises, now that she knew what they were, but she hoped she wouldn't hear that whimpering again. Could it have been Gigi? No, it had had a human sound.

At the stage door she looked up into the patch of sky. There was the same crooked chimneypot.

"It's so close, Rose," she repeated. "They ought to have a back door so you could come straight through, instead of going around."

Rose laughed. "You mean like what Josie Mansfield's got?"

"Who?"

"Josie Mansfield. Jim Fisk's lady friend. You've heard of Jim Fisk, ain't you?"

Julie nodded vaguely.

"Right around the corner from the Opera House is Miss Mansfield's house. Old Fisk don't have to go out in the rain to see her. It's s'posed

to be such a secret, and everybody knows about it, probably even his family. Come on."

From the quiet, dark alley, they climbed a flight of stairs and stepped into pandemonium. People were running this way and that. Rose explained it all on the way to what she called the green room —those were the gas men with bits of red and green glass to hold over the glaring calcium to create moonlight or daylight or firelight; those sheets of iron and the paddle wheels made thunder and wind. Overhead the ceiling stretched higher and higher. The flymen climbed and fluttered the sheets of scenery. The girls passed the property room, which looked like a junk shop with its hodgepodge of medieval armor and stuffed owls and fake trees, and pushed through the crowd of garishly painted chorus girls. The skinnier ones were strapping padding to their legs.

Rose's dressing room was just a corner, curtained off. There was a mirror, surrounded with flickering gas lamps, and a table holding rows and rows of rouge pots and powder pots and bottles of India ink.

Julie helped Rose into the costume, all the while looking anxiously over her shoulder at the flapping curtain. Anybody could have walked in!

Then she sat and watched Rose daub her face with greasepaint and touch up her eyebrows with

the India ink. Rose caught her expression in the mirror and laughed.

"I know it looks funny close up, but out there in front of them gaslights it'll be just right."

Soon there were shouts of "Time! Curtain! Curtain going up!" and the sounds of scurrying. Rose took Julie by the hand and found her a spot in the wings. "It's not like out front, of course, but you can see pretty good."

There was a fragment of silence as Rose and the others moved onto the stage. They stood in position as the music blared. Then, with the creaking of the rising curtain and the roar of applause, the show began.

It was wonderfully exciting, but it made little sense. There were dancing and singing and acrobats tumbling. Most of the time Julie could see only the performers' backs. Once, she caught sight of Rose. She was posturing and there were catcalls from the balcony.

Vulgar! No, I mustn't think that.

When the curtain came down after the first act Julie was almost swept off her feet by the exodus. She pressed against the wall to keep out of the way, but in spite of her efforts she was gradually pushed away from her original spot. There was no sign of Rose. When the curtain went up again Julie found herself on the far side of the green room. Here, there was not much to see or do, and she felt in the way. The room was stuffy with

smoke and the odor of perspiration. One of the stagehands had propped open a door, and Julie moved toward the breeze.

When she peeked out she saw that there was a small balcony, and she stepped out into the night. The evening air was pleasantly cool.

The balcony was only one flight up from the back of the theater. Again she found the landmark of the crooked chimneypot and now she could see dimly against the sky the top of the rooming house. *If I were home,* she thought, *and the lamp were lit, people could see it from here. I wonder if, from my window, this door is visible?*

From the wings the show had indeed been a disappointment. Perhaps it would be better from out front. Julie had seen circuses and some amateur performances in Port Sumas and enjoyed herself thoroughly, and of course, she had read all about the theaters and had looked forward to seeing shows. Mama had told her about theaters in New York City.

Mama again.

She was back to herself and her problem.

"I beg your pardon." There he was. The same tall man. "May I join you? It is stuffy inside."

She did not want to be alone on the balcony with him, but she did not know what to say. She stood very still, reminding herself that there were people inside to whom she could call. And she was curious as to who he was. Somebody connected

with the theater. Somebody who was a visitor at the rooming house. Could he possibly be the "important person" who was Miss Wintz's "protector"?

She gave him plenty of room on the balcony.

"Are you enjoying the show?" His tone was most polite.

"Not a great deal," she told him frankly. "But then, I couldn't see very much from the side of the stage."

"Perhaps I could arrange for you to get a seat out front."

She made a little movement toward the door.

"So you're backstage," he said. "You changed your mind about looking for a job."

"No. No, I'm just here with a friend of mine."

He moved between her and the door.

"Don't you think, on our second meeting, it is time we introduced ourselves?" His long body was blocking off the faint light from the doorway, and she could not read his expression.

He put out his hand. "I'm Vaughn Babcock."

Vaughn Babcock. Was that a name she should recognize?

"I'm Juliet Jameson."

The strength of his handclasp startled her. She was unable to free her hand.

"That's a lovely name. You really should be on the stage."

"My mother never would have permitted it."

Slowly he unclasped his large fingers and pulled his hand away.

"I'm not the sort of girl you apparently have taken me to be, Mr. Babcock."

After a moment he said, "Miss Jameson, my apologies."

She nodded. "Good evening, then." She moved into the light.

"Miss Jameson, it would please me very much if you could have supper with me. I know a discreet place."

She could see him plainly now. The expression on his face was strangely anxious, almost pleading. She shook her head. The applause and the music from inside the theater drowned out whatever he was trying to say.

She left him and pushed through the melee of the green room toward Rose's dressing room. She sat there trembling, praying that he would not follow her, that the show would end and Rose would return. It seemed a long, long wait until the next intermission.

Rose pushed back the curtain. Her grin faded. "Julie, whatcha doin' here?"

"Just waiting."

"Why ain'tcha out watchin' the show?"

"I did watch for a while."

"What's wrong, Julie?"

Rose had looked happy. Julie did not want to spoil her fun. "Nothing's wrong," she said. "How is the show going?"

"Swell. Look!" Rose held out a piece of paper. "Already I got sent this note. Supper. Delmonico's. Say, maybe you want me to see if he's got a gentleman friend for you." But her eyes were on Julie's modest, high-buttoned jacket.

"Oh, no, Rose, please!" She couldn't say, as she had to Mr. Babcock, "I'm not that kind of girl." So she said, "I'm awfully tired. I think I'd better just go back home."

"Sure. Sure, if you want to." Rose was in front of the mirror, daubing at her face.

A few minutes later Julie put her shawl around her shoulders and left the dressing room. No one seemed to notice as she walked through the green room to the stagedoor entrance. She hurried down the dark alley, looking neither right nor left, and emerged on crowded Broadway, where again she was unnoticed. Which was worse, to be alone in the crowd or to be annoyed by strangers? She could not decide.

She reached the house without any trouble, but as she pulled the bell cord and waited the interminable moments for the maid to appear, she thought of Miss Wintz and hoped that she could climb the stairs to her room without the landlady hearing her.

The maid opened the door. "Well, you're back!"

Julie nodded.

"Somebody was lookin' for you. I went allaway up, and you wasn't there, and come allaway down, and then he left you this."

There was an envelope with her name on it on the hall table.

Julie tore it open. Oblivious to Lizzie, she burst into tears of relief and anxiety. Ben had found Jared. In a hospital.

Chapter SIX

IN THE CARRIAGE on the way to the hospital the next morning, Ben explained what had happened.

"He was beaten up, Julie. It happens almost every day."

"Beaten? Oh, no! Who? Who?"

Ben shrugged. "One of the gangs of thugs."

"But why Jared?"

"All sorts of trumped-up reasons. They're hired gangs, of course. Politics, usually."

"I still say, why Jared?"

Ben gave her his crooked smile. "That I don't know. Maybe he can tell you."

The carriage had slowed at the corner of 10th and Broadway. The streets were choked with victorias, landaus, broughams, coupés. Ladies twirl-

ing their parasols and dragging ruffled skirts through the dust were going shopping. Everything was bright and busy and comfortable. Here the city was a happy place.

"Is Jared all right? Do you know?"

"He regained consciousness yesterday. It must have happened the night before you arrived. They beat him pretty badly, left him for dead. But he was lucky."

The carriage was headed east now, through a shabby neighborhood.

"It's not a very nice hospital," Ben explained. "Charity cases. Of course, they robbed him, not only of money but of any means of identification. But with your description, plus the fact that the moment he was lucid he started talking about his sister and about Kiley Mahone, the police were pretty quick to let me know."

"I'm so sorry I wasn't home when you came last night."

"That's all right." But his eyes were curious. "We couldn't have seen him until this morning anyhow. It's good you didn't just wait. I assume you found something interesting to do?"

The carriage had stopped outside a dismal box of a building.

She gave him a quick look. "Can I tell you later? Right now—"

"It's your brother. Right."

He went with her to the hospital desk and down

the bad-smelling hall, but at the door to the room said, "You better go in alone. I'll wait here. I don't think they'll let you stay very long."

The ward was a long, narrow room full of cots and curtains and all kinds of people of all ages, some wide-eyed, some asleep, some so bandaged that they looked like awkward packages, some sunk in apathy, some moaning, some she could scarcely bear to look at as she passed.

Jared was at the end of the line. She recognized him at once, despite the bandage around his head and the strangeness of seeing him lying there. Jared had always awakened before she had and been busy at something before she opened her eyes.

Before she could reach his bedside he cried, "Julie! Are you all right?" and tried to sit up.

"Jared, I'm fine!" She grabbed his hands, blinking back the tears. "It's you. How are you?"

"I feel like a log that's just gone through the sawmill. But the doc says it's mostly bruises. My head is the worst part. It still aches. Least I can make a little sense now, like I couldn't before."

He looked long in the bed. His feet stuck out from under the covers at the bottom, and his long arms extended from the nightshirt sleeves as they had when he was a little boy growing too fast.

"Oh, Jared, I'm so glad to have found you!"

He pulled his hands free with an embarrassed gesture. "Sh, Julie, don't bawl. I'll be all right.

What about you? What did you do when I didn't meet you? And how did you find me?"

She sat on a chair, talking up to him, trying to make her story as reassuring as she could. Her fears and her problems diminished in intensity when she looked at Jared, in this dreadful room. It really was a prison. Through the window she could see the sky and the feeble gray-green grass inside the hospital fence. Bad enough to be surrounded by strangers in New York City. So much worse to be shut up with them in an evil-smelling hospital! But as she talked, pretending to be sure of herself, she gained more assurance. Jared, however, began to me more and more concerned.

He expressed great suspicion of her trust in a young man who worked on a newspaper. He was more upset at the news of Wilma Lindquist's arrest. But when she told him that she had finally gone to Opal Street he became really agitated and again tried to sit up.

"But what else could I do?" she demanded, indignant. "I thought that's where you would look for me!"

"It's a bad house, Julie, run by a bad woman. I went there when I first came to New York City. I couldn't bear to write you about it, after all Mama had told us about the house."

"So you went to our uncle. Even though you knew Mama never had liked him."

He shook his head. "Not right away. I found a

place to stay." He leaned back wearily. "It was awful. They call the neighborhood Five Points. Don't go there, Julie. Promise me you won't go there! My room was in an attic, there wasn't any window, there were rats and fleas, the beds were canvas bags full of straw, and there were awful people, all crowded together. I walked the streets day after day until most of my money was gone. Then one day I met a fellow who asked if I had any relatives, and when I said Uncle Kiley's name, he told me where to find him."

He stopped speaking, and she took one of his hands. She looked up and saw Ben, at the door, signaling. She nodded to him, but Jared went on talking.

"Please go see Uncle Kiley, Julie. Tell him as soon as I get out of here I'll come back to work. Let him take care of you."

"I couldn't do that, Jared. I mean, be beholden to him. But I'll tell him about the job, for you, if you like."

"Does he know you're in New York?" He opened his eyes.

"Oh yes. I saw him. Jared, he told such dreadful lies about Mama!"

Jared sighed. "I'm afraid they're not lies. Mama was the one who told the lies. She was just a maid. She lost her job and came home. I couldn't write it all to you, Julie, I couldn't bear to tell you. I hate to now. But you've got to know. She worked for

very important people. After she married Pa and went West they came around to Uncle Kiley. She must have stolen money."

"Jared!"

She was shocked, and yet she did remember that Mama had always said that she had had money once. She had told Pa, during arguments, "I gave you all my money! And you just gambled it away!"

Jared's had been the voice of authority for the last eight years. It was different now. She had changed. She couldn't argue with him when he was ill. She must be patient and not upset him. But she knew that no matter what he said, and whatever the odds, she was going to find out the truth about her mother. She knew, too, that she was not going to fling herself upon the mercy of Kiley Mahone, even if he was her uncle. She saw with clarity for the first time in that ugly hospital room, holding her brother's huge hand, the result of the process that had been going on for the past six months. She had grown up. From now on she would think for herself.

"All right, Jared," she said gently. "I'll go to Uncle Kiley." With her other hand she smoothed his brow. After a moment she asked, "Do you know who hurt you, Jared? Or why?"

He shook his head. "No. This fellow just came up to me on the street. Ugly fellow with one cocked eye. You couldn't look straight at him. He

asked me if I was Jared Jameson, and when I said yes, somebody else said, 'Hey!' behind me, and I turned and the next thing I knew the first fellow, the cock-eyed one, musta hit me over the head."

Ben and one of the nurses were signaling to her. "I've got to go now, Jared. I'll come back tomorrow."

He squeezed her hand. "Oh, Julie, be careful!"

In the carriage she told Ben all that Jared had told her about his beating and of his job as bartender and her promise to go to their uncle.

"I'll have to, for Jared's sake. I must tell him what happened to Jared. Can you take me to the Gardens?"

"If you like." His eyes were filled with curiosity. He spoke to the driver and then he asked, "Something you want to tell me, Julie?"

She looked up with a smile. "Not yet, Ben. I've got to ask my uncle some questions. I'm kind of mixed up right now."

"Of course you are. At any rate, I must get back to work."

He was silent for a while, and then, just before the carriage pulled up in front of the Florentine Gardens, he spoke, almost shyly.

"Julie, the *Bugle* gave me a pair of tickets to the opening of the new show at the Theatre Marceau tonight. Would you like to go?"

She didn't look at him. "You're asking me instead of Rose?"

"How could I ask Rose, silly? She's in it!"

She turned then and caught the sarcastic twist of his lip. "I'd like to very much," she said, and then added, "Rose took me backstage last night. I couldn't see much. And I didn't have a very good time."

The carriage was in front of the Florentine Gardens.

"Don't worry," Ben said. "It's much better out front. That fool Rose had no business taking you back there."

She hadn't had a chance to tell him of her second meeting with Vaughn Babcock, when she had learned his name. Not until Ben was driving away and she was standing on the sidewalk did she remember why that name had sounded familiar. That first night, of course—Ben had spoken of the Babcock house.

The "important people" that Uncle Kiley said Mama had worked for. They could have been the Babcocks. And the strange, tall man was named Babcock too.

First things first. Uncle Kiley. But he was not in his office. And the man sweeping up the cigar butts was in no mood to tell her where she might find him.

Julie now was determined to see her uncle at

once. She stood her ground in the shabby foyer of the Gardens. She stamped her foot and told the man she was Mr. Mahone's niece, newly arrived in the city, and that it was a matter of life and death that she find her uncle. To her surprise, she wilted him and he gave her the address.

It was farther uptown than she ever had been, north of Union Square, up Fifth Avenue, where the grand houses lined the street. Here New York was an elegant, tidy grande dame of a city. The carriage turned off the avenue onto a street of new brownstones. The long row of identical houses were like narrow-eyed spinsters sitting on high-backed chairs and frowning at life.

She was still standing on the curb, looking up at the house and thinking of what she would say, when a brougham with a driver perched up front drew up at the curb. She stood back as her uncle leaped out.

He turned to assist from the brougham two long, bitter-faced females. She smiled at him, and he looked completely flabbergasted.

"Julie. Julie Jameson," he stammered. "What are you doing here?"

The women stared.

"I came to see you, Uncle Kiley."

Red-faced, falling over his words, he made the introductions.

"My wife. My daughter, Hortense. This is my niece, Julie Jameson. My sister Ginny's child.

Jared's sister. You remember I told you about Jared."

They nodded, distantly. Then Mrs. Mahone cleared her throat and issued an icy invitation. "Would you care to come in?"

Before Julie could answer, her uncle said hastily, "Never mind, Mabel. The carriage is still out. I'll take Julie for a little ride, so we can talk."

"Very well," said Mrs. Mahone, and turned. The daughter said shyly, "Nice to have met you," and then followed her mother up the steps.

Uncle Kiley took off his bowler and mopped his brow, as the door closed behind them.

"Whew," he said. "You know what they thought, at first. That you were one of the girls from the Gardens."

Julie glanced up. The two women were at the front window. Uncle Kiley's face was even redder. *Why, he's ashamed of me,* she thought. *And he's afraid of his wife.* She wanted to turn on her heel and leave him there with his embarrassment, but she had promised Jared.

"I have a message for you," she said as calmly as she could, "from my brother."

Embarrassment was replaced by concern. "Get into the carriage, won't you, Julie? So we can talk."

Once they were inside and clattering away over the cobblestones, he asked, "Jared? Where is he?"

"He's in a hospital. He was beaten up by some

terrible thugs. He didn't even come to until last night. He couldn't let you know. He wanted me to tell you, and to tell you he wants his job back as soon as he can get out of the hospital."

"Oh." He frowned. "I don't know."

"Why not?"

He turned and looked at her, and for the first time there was a truly kindly glint in his eye.

"Little girl, you shouldn't get mixed up in these things."

"But I am mixed up in them!"

"You know, child, you look like your ma. But you're spunkier. You're like your grandma—my ma. She used to call herself a Huguenot from the hills of Tennessee. She had a temper, and she wasn't afraid of the devil himself."

Julie wasn't to be deterred. "Why won't you give Jared his job back?"

"I didn't say I wouldn't. I just said I didn't know. He's spelled trouble, that boy."

"But how? How?"

"Oh, people snooping around, asking who he was and where he came from. Babcock's men."

"Babcock!"

"Vaughn Babcock. He's running for mayor in the fall."

"But what has that got to do with Jared?"

"Maybe that brother of yours knows more than he's telling his little sister. I don't know. All I do know is that I'm in business, and if I'm going to

stay in business I've got to be damn . . . I've got to be careful with the politicians. And I've had all the trouble I want with the Babcock family."

The driver leaned around to ask, "Where now, Mr. Mahone?"

Kiley Mahone looked at her. "I'm taking you home, child. What is the address?"

"Number Three Opal Street."

"Number Three Opal Street!"

"Thank you," said the driver.

They stared at each other, and in that moment Julie knew the answer before she put the question.

"Is it true what you told me, about Jared, about Mama?"

"It's true."

"It was the Babcock house, and she worked there. But she didn't, she couldn't have stolen from them!"

Again he mopped his forehead. "I guess you best know the truth—even if it hurts you—for your own good. You and Jared are a couple of plucky youngsters. I wouldn't like to see you get hurt. I didn't mean to sound the way I did about your ma. But you see, she was the spoiled brat of the family. And stuck-up. Full of highfalutin ideas and a great one for telling fibs. She was ten years younger than me, and we never did get along.

"Then when she came running home saying she had lost her job and was in trouble . . ." He

shook his head. "I just couldn't forgive her for what she did. Fred Jameson was a friend of mine. She tricked him into marrying her. I watched her do it. I don't think poor Fred even suspected her condition."

"What!"

She looked directly at him, and this time she believed him.

"I didn't tell Jared," he said.

This was worse than theft, worse than anything she possibly could have imagined. Her mother, in the family way, marrying another man.

"Ginny and Fred went off out West, and I felt sorry for Fred, but still I said good riddance to bad rubbish. Then the Babcocks came snooping around asking all sorts of questions. Seems like she'd stolen money, according to them."

Julie blinked back the tears and turned her face to the carriage window. Buildings and trees and awnings and people and sunshine. Beautiful New York City, of which poor Mama had talked so much. It was suddenly as false as the scenery at the Theatre Marceau—flapping canvas, manipulated by men with ropes. Fake sunshine. Fake flowers.

"Julie . . ."

"Yes?" She turned to the fat-faced man. Her only relative, except for Jared, in the big, strange city.

"I think best you and your brother should go

back out West. I'll stake you to it. Soon as he's out of the hospital."

He wasn't bad, not really. She couldn't feel as if he were a real uncle, but in his way he was trying to be kind.

"Not yet," she said. "Not quite yet. There are things I have to know. I don't care about politics. But I've got to find out who beat Jared and why. And I've got to find out about Mama. I've got to. I can't go the rest of my life wondering what was true and what wasn't."

"Stubborn, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"And nothing I could say would stop you."

"No."

He leaned back and cocked his head. "How do you mean to go about it?"

She thought a moment. "I think I should go straight to Mr. Babcock."

His eyebrows rose above the sharp blue eyes. "To his home? He has a wife and daughter too," he added dryly.

"He's married?" she gasped.

"Of course."

She was silent, musing on the accepted duplicity that seemed to be part of the web of the city. Then she said, "I won't need to go to his house. I'm sure I can find him at the Theatre Marceau."

Along Broadway Uncle Kiley moved into the shadowy corner of the brougham. "Julie," he

asked, "would it be all right if I left you at the corner?"

"Of course."

"It might be wiser. Like I told you, I'm a businessman. I've got to be careful."

When she put out her hand to say goodbye he clenched it with his square fingers. "Get out of that house, child. Soon as you can. And give a second thought about going back out West. I mean it."

She nodded politely. "What shall I tell Jared, about his job?"

He sighed. "Tell him to come and see me."

"Thank you!"

She stood hesitantly for a moment, then decided not to go back to the house. She would have a bit of lunch and go directly to the theater.

She was at the stand across the street, munching a sausage and roll, when she saw Rose and Ben walking down Broadway arm in arm, laughing. Her first impulse was to cross and run after them, tell them all that she had discovered. But something in their companionable smiles rebuffed her.

Did everybody in New York lead double lives? Was Ben the "gent" with whom Rose had had an engagement later last evening? And what was Ben doing with her when he had said he must go back to work?

She swallowed the last of the roll over a lump in her throat, wiped her lips on her handkerchief, and crossed to the Theatre Marceau.

She was lucky. The stagehand who opened the theater door for her assured her that Mr. Babcock was in his office.

Then he had more than an interest in the theater. He must own it!

The stagehand led her through the half-dark theater to the side of the stage and back. The office was at the top of a short flight of stairs, above the green room.

She knocked, straightened her bonnet and shawl, and waited a long moment before she heard him say, "Come in!"

It was a richly furnished room, filled with gilt and marble. The floor was covered with a thick crimson carpet, and the light from the window danced across a silver inkstand and a crystal decanter.

He rose from behind a huge mahogany desk as she entered. "Miss Jameson! This is a pleasure." But his eagerness had an overcast of wariness.

"I would like to talk to you, Mr. Babcock."

"You've changed your mind about a job?"

"No. It's something personal."

There was a flicker of definite doubt; then he straightened his narrow shoulders, touched his goatee, and suggested, "Why don't we ride up in Central Park and have an ice in the pavilion?

Somehow this grubby office does not seem the proper background for a private conversation."

Yesterday she would have been shocked by such a proposal. But today she was fully aware of his apprehension. And she knew more about him. He was a respectable married man who was going to run for mayor. But he haunted the backstage of a theater and the corridors of a rooming house like Miss Wintz's. He might be rich and powerful, but he was full of secrets. At first he had thought her just any young girl who might or might not accept his advances. Now he recognized her as someone quite different.

"Thank you, Mr. Babcock. That would be very nice."

It was a lovely shiny black open carriage with a team of horses to match. What a wonderful way to ride through the city! He did not speak except to point out the sights—the Hotel Astor, A. T. Stewart's mansion, the promenade around the Croton Reservoir at 42nd Street. Central Park was like real country, an oasis of trees and grass adjacent to rocky, shack-strewn desolation. There was a meadow with sheep grazing, children rolling hoops, and more and more fine carriages.

They found a spot on the sunny side of the pavilion. He ordered ices and then sat looking at her. She put her hand on the little gold key, and he spoke his first personal words.

"You must pardon my staring, Miss Jameson.

But that is a most unusual piece of jewelry. Does it have a utilitarian purpose?"

"I don't know. It belonged to my mother."

"Oh?"

"It's my mother I want to talk about."

He did not reply.

"I think maybe you can tell me something about her."

"I?"

"Shall I start at the beginning?"

"Please do."

She first gave him her customary explanation to strangers of how Mama had come from New York City and talked about it so much that she and her brother always had dreamed of coming here. How all they knew was that Mama had lived at number 3 Opal Street.

"So when my brother was unable to meet me," she concluded, "I went to the only address I knew. Of course, it turned out not to be Mama's real home."

"Poor child." His eyes, his tone, and his whole manner were completely sympathetic.

Now came the difficult part.

"Since then I have seen my uncle Kiley Mahone."

He put down his little teaspoon. He gripped the edge of the table.

"And I've been told a lot of things. Some very hard to believe. That my mother only lived in that

house as a maid. And that the people who used to own the house were named Babcock."

No response.

She took another spoonful of ice. The breeze rustled the trees outside the pavilion, the sunshine highlighted the wrinkles in his brow. He was biting his lips.

"Mr. Babcock, is everything I've told you so far the truth?"

He nodded.

"Then it was your house?"

"My uncle's."

"Then you must have known my mother. Her name was Ginny Mahone."

"Yes."

"Please tell me about her."

He seemed to rally. He sat up straighter and smiled.

"Would you care for another ice, Miss Jameson? Or perhaps some tea?"

"No, thank you."

It was her turn to wait for an answer, and at last she got it.

"Indeed I do remember your mother. She was a fine little girl. And very pretty."

"My mother was a lady."

"Oh, yes, yes," he agreed vaguely.

"She loved that house. She talked about it many times. I recognized it the moment I saw it,

and the front hall, too. And other smaller things."

"I'm glad she felt at home there." He sounded as if he were ready to drop the subject.

"The point is, Mr. Babcock, something dreadful must have happened to my mother, to make her run away."

"Oh, perhaps not." He shrugged and did not look her in the eye. "It might have been something very trivial. She was a jumpy little creature, not half as composed or purposeful or daring as you." He looked up, smiling ingratiatingly.

"But after she ran away you went to see my uncle Kiley, didn't you?"

"Of course. My uncle and I were worried about her."

"Is that the uncle who took his own . . ." she dared.

"Yes."

"Uncle Kiley says that you or your uncle accused my mother of stealing money."

"Nonsense!" His tone was abruptly sharp. "Absolute nonsense. No one would have accused little Ginny of theft. She was an innocent little creature. No, of course not. We wished her well. I'm glad to know that she did find happiness."

"I don't think she did." The breeze seemed cooler. Under her poise she felt a quickening sadness. "Mama talked so much about the past, and all the while she was being dragged from one little

town to another, and she was poor. And then to die in a horrible forest fire. You call that happiness?"

He reached across the table and patted her hand with his long, cold fingers. She pulled her hand away.

"My dear child, that is all in the past. You must not think about the past, but the future. What do you intend to do now? Go back out West, I presume?"

"Of course not! I'm going to make a home for my brother."

"You've found him, then?"

"Yes, I've found him. In a hospital. He was beaten up and left for dead."

Uncle Kiley had suspected "Babcock's men." It seemed hard to believe. On the surface, at least, Mr. Babcock was a gentleman—in spite of all the mysteries about him.

He did not blink an eye. He said, "How dreadful! But then it happens frequently nowadays."

"So I've been told."

"I should think your brother would want to go home now. Don't you really think it would be best, for both of you?"

"No!"

"But what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to find out the whole truth about my mother. And I'm going to find out who beat up Jared. And why."

He looked at her thoughtfully, eyes narrowing. The band of sunlight left the pavilion. She pulled her shawl about her shoulders.

"Miss Jameson, have you any friends?"

"A few." She would not mention Rose nor Ben nor Wilma Lindquist. Let him wonder.

She got up from the table. "Thank you very much for the ice, Mr. Babcock. I really think I should be going . . . home now."

"If you like."

Clouds were covering the sky on the way back. They did not speak until they drew up and stopped on Opal Street. She turned to him, putting out her hand, although she disliked touching him.

"Thank you again, Mr. Babcock. You're the first person in New York who's had kind words to say about my mother. I appreciate that."

This time his handshake was limp, his eyes evasive.

"There must be others who knew her," she went on. "I mean to find them."

"After twenty years?"

"Twenty-two."

"Twenty-two," he repeated. "How old are you child?"

"Twenty."

"And your brother?"

"Twenty-one."

She pulled her hand away and stepped out of the carriage.

She turned and looked up at the house, mellowed in the late-afternoon light to something of its old beauty.

Then she saw Malvina Wintz in the parlor window.

Chapter SEVEN

She had spoken boldly to Vaughn Babcock, but at the sight of her landlady's face Julie's spirits went limp again. She hesitated at the bottom of the steps, pretending to be looking for something in her reticule. Mr. Babcock was not her friend, certainly, but at least she had learned something from him—his family never would have accused her mother of being a thief. There was a lot he was not telling, and he wanted Jared and her to leave town. If she only knew why . . .

She looked up and caught Miss Wintz's eye.

What about her? Why does she want to go?

"Take the bull by the horns, Julie," Pa used to say.

Miss Wintz is an old-timer. Maybe I can learn

something from her if I butter her up, as Rose told me to.

She asked Lizzie to announce her, and a moment later she walked into the parlor.

Again Miss Wintz's raiment was astonishing. She came toward Julie, from her spot by the window, with her usual graceful stealth –a mammoth black-and-yellow-striped cat, wearing jet earrings that swung like pendulums.

"So you've been out riding with a gentleman today." The laugh was ripe with insinuation. "That's one way of getting acquainted with . . . the city."

"Mr. Babcock was very kind," Julie said noncommitally, trying not to show her resentment of the laugh.

"Indeed."

Yesterday Miss Wintz had tried to be friendly —for a purpose. If only Julie had been playing too!

"May I sit down?"

"If you want."

This time Julie crossed the flowered carpet to a chair near the fire, next to Gigi's cushion, and boldly patted the little dog.

The black-and-yellow taffeta swished. Miss Wintz took a chair opposite. Her raised eyebrows were the only expression on her face. "You wanted to see me?" It was a challenge.

"Miss Wintz, I'm afraid I've been rather rude to you." Julie put on her best smile. "I should like to apologize and explain."

Only a nod.

"You see, when I first came, I was so upset that I didn't know what to do. My brother was supposed to meet me. . . . And again she told her story, of her mother's talk of New York and Opal Street, of Jared's coming, of her arrival. Miss Wintz's face remained a mask until Julie mentioned her uncle.

"Kiley Mahone!" Miss Wintz gasped. "Kiley Mahone is your uncle?"

"You know him?"

"I know of him. He's rather notorious."

Perhaps I'm telling her too much, Julie thought.

"Anyway, he was good enough to give Jared a job. And as soon as Jared is out of the hospital he can go back to work, and everything will be all right. I'll be leaving here."

Shadows were dancing over the flowered walls and the flowered carpet. Miss Wintz went to the bell cord and summoned the maid to light the lamps. She did not speak to Julie again until Lizzie had left, and she had taken a standing position at the other end of the fireplace.

"I should think it would be wiser for you and your brother to go back where you came from."

Julie sat up straight and looked up at her. "Not yet. I've got to find out some things first."

"Like what?"

"Who was responsible for my brother's beating."

Miss Wintz shrugged. "It happens every day."

"But not to my brother!"

"If he's all right now, why bother?"

Don't get angry. Don't let her coldbloodedness put you off. Butter her up!

"There's something else. Maybe you could help me."

Miss Wintz's expression implied that she would not be interested.

"I want to find people who knew my mother. Have you lived in this neighborhood for a long time?"

"I have not. And for sure I didn't know your mother."

"Something dreadful happened to her—in this house, a long time ago, before it was boarded up. Before the suicide. I want to find out what it was."

"I can't help you."

Miss Wintz walked past Julie to the door, stopping only to command Gigi to follow. The portieres swung across her bustle, and all that remained was the heavy odor of her lilac perfume.

She's lying, was Julie's first thought. *She must be lying.*

Julie was tired of prying, of wondering, of pretending to be polite. She sighed and got up from her chair and went out into the hall.

Again there was a note on the table addressed to her, and again it was from Ben Van Kirk. He would be there at seven o'clock for supper before the theater.

She smiled into the convex mirror and laughed at her funny reflection. He had not forgotten or changed his mind. She raced up the stairs. Tonight was the night for her very best dress.

She had bought the material soon after Jared left for the East—a remnant of sheer white lawn. The lace trim, yards and yards of it, was also a remnant. She had sewn the lace in heart-shaped patterns to match the heart-shaped neckline, embroidered the pink and blue forget-me-nots, and fashioned the little pink and blue bows. Mrs. Henderson had called it "the most beautiful dress in the world." Julie had copied it from a picture in *Godey's Lady's Book*. Her best dress, for New York City.

But when she came down the stairs, there was Ben with his rumpled jacket and bashed-in hat. Evidently newspaper reporters did not dress for the theater. He did look somewhat surprised.

"Oh dear," Julie said. "I'm too dressed up. Should I change?"

He shook his head. "It's very pretty. Like a valentine.

He helped her put her incongruous old shawl over her shoulders.

Down in the street he told her, "We'll have a bite at the Bismarck Hofbrau, where I have credit. After the theater I'll take you someplace that will do your dress justice."

"Ben, you needn't."

He put his finger on the tip of her nose. "This evening, Miss Jameson, is for fun. No serious thoughts. No problems. Because that's the way I want it." His voice was stern, but his eyes were twinkling.

The Bismarck Hofbrau was just a block the other side of Broadway, a homey little German spot where the proprietor was cook and the proprietor's wife sat behind the cash register. The building had been a roadside inn in Revolutionary times. The woodwork was dark and stained and chipped, and there were candles instead of gaslight. The Schmidts greeted Ben as if he were their son. Indeed, it was like being in someone's home, and all Julie's lonesomeness vanished. The Schmidts admired her dress, and Ben let her choose a dark corner where she would not feel conspicuous.

They concentrated on sauerbraten and cabbage and dumplings, and not until they reached the apple strudel did Ben tell her, "Rose has a big part in tonight's show. Did you know?"

"No." She was remembering them on the street together that afternoon.

"Well, at least she has one song. I guess this is

not much different from the last show. New name, that's all. 'The Glib Girls of Gotham.' Girls, girls, girls."

"I haven't seen Rose today," said Julie.

Ben said nothing.

It was much nicer to go through the front door of the theater, to be part of the brightly dressed crowd. She was so busy looking at the satins and velvets and plumes that she almost forgot what an ill-assembled couple she and Ben were. A valentine, he had said. From the way some of the ladies smiled down at her she guessed what really was wrong with the dress. It was just too young. *I am so much older,* she thought, *than I was six months ago.*

They had very good seats, close to the stage. The cheapest seats, up in the gallery, were filled with young fellows who kept shouting and stamping. Even the people downstairs were noisier than she had expected. In pictures of the interiors of theaters audiences sat as decorously as if in church. But there were lozenge peddlers and peanut men hawking up and down the aisles, and as soon as the orchestra in the pit started playing, half the audience began bellowing with them.

Across the stage was a huge curtain with a beautiful picture of Venice, marred only by the advertisements for pills and soap and whiskey around its rim.

Ben bought programs, and there was Rose's name. Her part was "The Shepherdess."

"Curtain going up! Curtain going up!" Julie's heart beat faster as the gaslights in their little wire baskets around the rim of the stage grew brighter. Perhaps it was the glare of the gaslights that made the magic, but it was thrilling. There was something strangely akin to the unnerving excitement of a fire. The crackling of dozens of programs added to the effect, and the dark all about them, the flames in front.

Like "The Beauties from Buttercup Creek," the "Glib Girls of Gotham" was a mixed-up affair with dancing and singing and acrobats and some very smart little dogs. People told jokes with words Julie did not understand, and the audience whistled and clapped and roared away like a pack of wild animals.

It was fun, better than a circus.

The clowns somersaulted off. A new backdrop creaked down, apple blossoms unusually large and unnaturally pink. And Rose skipped onto the stage.

Her red hair was flowing like a cape over her shoulders. She was wearing a shepherdess costume and clutching the crook as if it were a cane. For a moment she stood uncertainly behind the footlights, her lips trembling. She swallowed, stuck out her chin, and began to sing, roughly and de-

fiantly, a musical version of Herrick's poem "Gather Ye Rosebuds While Ye May."

The song was simple and sentimental; yet Rose imbued it with her own emotions, her desperate ambition, her resentment for all the bad times the world had given her. Until—perhaps in the middle of the song—her resentment seemed to vanish and she turned on her charm.

The song stopped the show. Rose came back again and again, and at the finale, when everyone came onstage for the grand tableaux, there were calls for "The Shepherdess! The Shepherdess!" And people were throwing bouquets until the stage looked like a garden, and there stood Rose, throwing kisses, and finally her crook, which some admirer seized for a souvenir.

Julie turned to watch Ben's face. He was utterly, completely absorbed, clapping with all his might. There were tears in his eyes! What was all this about a business pact? she wondered, and was wildly jealous of the triumphant redhead on the stage in front of them.

When the curtain came down for the last time, Ben said, "Well, Rose has what she wants."

"She was wonderful," Julie said gallantly, meaning it and hating herself for her jealousy.

"She's not a bad performer. She also knows how to meet the right people."

Julie, a bit puzzled, swallowed and asked,

"You mean . . . your stories in the newspaper?"

He looked at her in surprise. "I mean Mr. Vaughn Babcock," he said shortly. "Come on, Julie, we're going to Delmonico's to celebrate."

On the way to the restaurant she tried not to think, but to look out the carriage window at the fast-moving crowds and the blazing gaslight, to tell herself, *This is New York City, where you dreamed of being for so long. Enjoy yourself.*

But Mama's unhappy ghost was beside her.

The dazzling white tablecloth, the silver, the waiter bowing over their table, the silver bucket with the bottle—all were as Mama had described them. But if Ginny Mahone truly had been a maid, how would she ever have known about fancy restaurants? Had she eavesdropped? It was difficult to picture dignified, graceful Mama hiding in corners or peeking through keyholes.

"Champagne and oysters tonight. All right?"

"All right." It was a doubtful whisper. Everything was beginning to have the quality of a dream—names and faces turning up in illogical ways, shifting and changing.

Ben lifted his glass. "To Rose!"

She lifted her glass hesitantly. She wished Rose Cassidy all the success in the world. And yet . . .

"What is it, Julie?"

"Nothing," she said hastily. She wasn't used to

subterfuge. "I guess I'm a little jealous, that's all."

She was blushing with embarrassment, but he didn't appear to notice. He said, "Don't be jealous of Rose's success. She's paying for it. Or will."

"Paying for it?"

"Vaughn Babcock. He doesn't do favors for free."

Julie shuddered. "So that's who she met last night."

Ben nodded. "Somebody took her to a party and introduced her. According to Rose they had a long talk in a quiet corner, and the net result was that he put her in the shepherdess role. He's been a stage-door johnny for years. Incidentally, he owns the Theatre Marceau."

"I know."

"I guess it's his favorite property. However, Rose dug out of him some fascinating facts about other real-estate interests. Things I can follow up. So far, nobody's been able to uncover anything untoward about our friend Mr. Babcock. It's all been rumor. Now maybe I can get a clue. There's an awful lot of shenanigans going on in this city in real estate. The bigwigs get wind of property that's going to be valuable and snap it up for a song and then hold it to sell at the right moment. Like most newspapers, the *Bugle* loves an exposé. Babcock is one fellow on their list. He plans to run for mayor this fall."

"I know."

"There seems to be a lot you know, Miss Jameson. Have some more champagne and go on."

She felt better. Was it this beautiful bubbly sweet-happy wine in the pretty stemmed glasses? She'd never tasted champagne before, and it seemed the most wonderful drink in the world. And in front of her on a bed of ice on a silver platter were the tiny delicate oysters, dainty babies in comparison with the Puget Sound giants she was used to. And the shaggy young man opposite her was her friend.

"I don't like Mr. Babcock at all," she said aloud. "How can Rose?" Then she laughed. "Who am I to talk? I went for a ride with him, and he bought me an ice in the pavilion in the park!"

"What?"

She drank some more champagne and told him of her succession of meetings with Vaughn Babcock and of what Uncle Kiley had told her of the Babcock family. Ben nodded thoughtfully throughout.

"So you see, I've got to find out the truth. Everybody says Jared and I should just go back out West. Uncle Kiley and Vaughn Babcock, and even Miss Wintz. At first I couldn't believe what people told me. Mama couldn't have been a maid. And I couldn't, I still can't, believe that she was a thief. Most of all, that she got into trouble and had to run away and marry my father."

"And of course you can't bear to imagine who probably was responsible."

She stared at him. Words had slipped out through her champagne haze, she had just rattled on and on, without any attempt at logic. But Ben had been using logic—he had reached a conclusion that, as he said, she did not want to imagine.

"I got a glimpse of that brother of yours this morning. The resemblance is marked."

"Resemblance?"

Ben blinked his eyes. "It could have been," he said quietly, "that Vaughn Babcock knew your mother very well."

"Oh, no!" Unbelievable, unthinkable, another dreadful lie. But perhaps it wasn't a lie. She should have thought of it that very afternoon when Uncle Kiley talked to her, but somehow the whole story had been so fantastic that she had not put two and two together. Jared, her brother Jared . . . not her real brother?

Tears of anger came into her eyes. "I hate Vaughn Babcock!" she exclaimed. "I hate him!"

"Sh, Julie."

The people at the next table were staring. She bent her head and forced back the tears.

"You've walked into pretty dangerous territory, little girl. Enemy territory. No wonder everyone has been advising you to go back home."

She flung up her head. "Not you? Not you, too?"

His smile twisted. "I wouldn't think of it. I recognize independence when I see it. You're a fighter, Julie Jameson. But I will join the others in warning you that there is danger. Babcock and his henchmen are ruthless."

"I don't care!"

He reached over and touched her hand. Suddenly he wasn't funny-looking at all. He was very sweet and kind and wonderful.

"Julie, I'll help. I'll find other ways for you to learn the truth. Safer than going to the horse's mouth. All right?"

"All right."

"Now eat your oysters, like a good child."

The nightmare that had occurred over and over again during the last eight years awakened her later that night. The forest fire. Jared crying, "Run, Julie, run!" Running down out of the hills and the woods toward the bay and the dock, the night sky overhead lit up as if the whole world were Halloween, the fire snapping and crackling behind her, a great orange monster. Stumbling over the wooden sidewalks past the wooden houses, sparks flying as thick and fast as if the stars were falling. "Mama, Mama, where are you?" The smell of cedar and hemlock and fir,

the swish of the waters against the dock pilings, like beasts waiting.

She awakened in a cold sweat and tossed off her covers. For a moment she did not know where she was, and the fright was doubled as she gradually remembered. She climbed out of bed and went to the window and opened the shutters a little, but the faint light of the night sky revealed only the outlines of the furniture. She rinsed the perspiration from her face at the wash stand.

She was suddenly wide-awake. There was no sound from the theater at this hour. At first there was no sound at all, and then she heard voices. She tiptoed to the door, but they were not coming from the hall. Nor from the window. Curious, she stood still in the center of the room, listening intently.

The voices appeared to be coming from the armoire.

In sheer curiosity, she opened it. The voices grew louder. She pushed her clothes aside and felt the back of the armoire. A curtain was hung at the back, half tacked down. At last her probing fingers found a bump and pulled at it.

Behind the curtain was another door.

It creaked a little as she opened it, and the voices ceased. She waited a moment and heard Vaughn Babcock say, "But she's a find! A real find, I tell you."

From the open door came a dusty, musty odor. There was space, she was sure, though it was completely dark. She curled up inside the armoire, on the edge of that space, listening. The voices came from below, as if traveling up a shaft.

"I won't have it!" said Malvina Wintz.

"Dear Mallie, don't I discover girls every year? And this one has real talent. I mean, I think I've spotted someone who can learn to act, someone with your quality, my dear."

Then he was Miss Wintz's "protector"!

"Rose Cassidy lives in this house," Malvina went on. "I know her. She's a tramp. She goes around with some fellow from the *Bugle*. I wouldn't trust her a spit away!"

"Mallie, don't be jealous."

"Of course I'm jealous. I always am. And you know it. So watch out."

There was silence again, and it seemed as if they had moved away. Julie was almost ready to crawl back through to her room, when the voices started again and she heard Malvina say, "And another thing. What are you doing with that Jameson brat?"

"I was merely being kind to the poor girl. Did you know that her mother used to be a maid in this house?"

"So she told me."

"She is a nice child, Mallie. Quite upset about

her mother. It seems she had been led to believe that this was her mother's home."

"What did happen to her mother?" Malvina asked. "I'd like to know."

Julie leaned forward eagerly.

"I don't know. She got into some kind of trouble, and Uncle Wilbur sent her packing. I was away at school at the time. I couldn't tell Miss Jameson very much about her mother."

Outside the huge clock bonged out three o'clock and wiped out all other sound. When it stopped Julie heard Malvina ask, "Do you s'pose she knew anything about it, anything at all?"

And his answer, "Oh, no, Ginny couldn't have known. And I'm sure all this little girl is interested in is her mother."

"I wouldn't be too sure. What about this brother of hers who was beaten up? Were those your boys?"

A pause, then Vaughn's voice, much quieter. "Cocky went too far. I only told him to frighten him off. The boy could cause trouble."

"So could his sister."

"I doubt it. She's impudent, but she's a rather sweet little thing, and I hardly believe—"

"Stop it!" Malvina's voice was getting shrill. "Don't you say one more word about her. I'm fed up to the teeth with her. I'm going to get rid of her as quickly as possible."

"Mallie—"

"This is my house. You gave it to me. I shall do as I like. If I were to tell certain people—"

"Mallie!"

"If she gets any more pushy, I tell you, I'll kick her out!"

Julie began to tremble. She was thoroughly frightened as well as uncomfortable, but she could not move. She must hear more. But after Malvina's harsh words there was only Babcock's voice, abruptly gentle. "Mallie, Mallie, Mallie . . ." dying away to a whisper and then complete silence.

Very carefully Julie pulled the inner door shut, lowered the cloth, and crawled back through the armoire. By daylight she would explore the space beyond. It would be too risky in the dark, and if she could hear them so plainly, they might be able to hear her.

She made sure her door was locked and tiptoed back into bed.

She lay awake for a long time. What did she know for sure, and what was mere guesswork?

The stories conflicted. Had Vaughn Babcock lied to her, or to Malvina just now, when he said he'd been away at school at the time of Mama's trouble? And if Mama had been unhappy here, why had she spent the rest of her life talking about the house as if it had been her own home?

She had learned a great deal by eavesdropping,

but she also had plunged into a deeper mystery. When the clock struck three it had drowned out another secret, the real reason why those two wanted to get rid of her.

She must hurry, first thing in the morning, and explore the secret place behind the armoire.

Chapter
EIGHT

SHE WAS awakened in the morning by a great banging on the door and Lizzie hollering that there was a message for her.

Jared wanted her to come to the hospital, immediately.

She found him sitting up in bed and in much better spirits. He could leave the hospital in the afternoon.

"Oh, Jared, why didn't you tell me in your note?"

"I don't know. I just got to worrying about you in that house. Did you bring your things with you?"

"Of course not."

"Julie, what are you up to?"

"What do you mean?" There he was, bossing again.

"Uncle Kiley was here last night. He's worried about you. So am I."

It was odd how their roles had reversed. Now she must protect Jared. Somehow she must convince him of the importance of her sleuthing, without telling him the whole story and certainly without increasing his worry. Now, looking at her brother's familiar features, she could see what Ben had meant about the resemblance. The same long face and almost the same nose. Jared's eyes, of course, were big, like Mama's, like her own. Round blue guileless eyes.

"Go on, Julie. Tell me. What are you up to?"

She began slowly. "I went to Uncle Kiley, like you wanted me to. He told me more about Mama than you had. And then I went to see Mr. Babcock and he told me more, but not everything. And I talked to my landlady, Miss Wintz. And today I've got to do some more investigating."

"Investigating what?"

She caught herself. Best not to tell him yet what she had learned or guessed about their mother but to stick to the present. She perched on the edge of his bed and spoke in whispers so the other patients could not hear. Of Uncle Kiley's suspicion that it was Babcock's men who had beaten Jared, of what she had learned through Ben Van Kirk,

and finally her eavesdropping and Babcock's remark about Cocky going too far.

"Didn't you say it was a cock-eyed man, Jared?"

He nodded and set his jaw in the way that spelled anger. "Julie, I'm going straight to him, the minute they let me out of this bed."

"How can you find him? You can't go all over New York looking for a cock-eyed man."

"Not him. Babcock. If he's so important, I'll find him."

"Oh, Jared, you mustn't! He's dangerous!"

"You went to him."

"Yes, but Jared, Ben says—"

"Hang Ben."

"Look, Ben will help us. And we'll help him." As she went on to explain the *Bugle*'s plan of an exposé, she watched her brother's eyes widen with wonder at his little sister.

When she finished he said, "Julie, I want you to get your things out of that house. Right away. This morning."

"No, Jared." She set her own jaw.

"What do you plan to do?"

"I'm going to the *Bugle* and see Ben, tell him what I overheard last night, and decide what we do next. Don't worry about me. Nothing can happen to me in broad daylight."

"Go to Uncle Kiley, please."

"No. And you shouldn't either. Not right away. That's where they'd look for you."

"Well," he sighed, "you seem to want to do the planning. What do you want me to do?"

"Do you have any money at all?"

"Uncle Kiley gave me some. Why?"

"Take a cab and come to . . ." She thought a moment. "I know. The Bismarck Hofbrau. They're real nice people. I'll meet you there. And I'll get Ben to come."

She jumped down from the bed. "I'll have to leave now. I've got to hurry." The secret place behind the armoire—she must explore it.

There was the shadow of Jared's usual smile. "To think," he said, "that Mama told *me* to take care of *you*."

At the *Bugle* office she had to wait for Ben, and when he finally dashed in he cried, "Julie, I just went to see you. Nobody knew where you'd gone. I've something to tell you."

"Ben, I've something to tell you!"

They went back to his desk, and he found her a swivel chair, and she poured out all she had learned the night before. He listened eagerly. "And so," she concluded, "I've got to rush back right now and really explore that secret place. Before Miss Wintz makes me leave for good."

He tapped a pencil on his desk. "Julie, I ap-

preciate all you've told me, but I've got news too. Your friend Wilma Lindquist is out of jail. And wants to see you."

"And I want to see her, but I think it's more important to—"

"Wilma is now staying with a friend—a native New Yorker, an old lady who knows everybody and is a famous gossip. I think you should pay them a visit. If you can sift the wheat from the chaff, you might learn something from Miss Tinsley."

"She might have known my mother?" Julie asked eagerly.

"Not likely. But she certainly has known the Babcock family."

Miss Tinsley's house was an old one on Thompson Street, close to a rather shabby neighborhood. The narrow parlor into which Julie was ushered had ugly, faded brown wallpaper. There was a sad-eyed Newfoundland dog embroidered on the hearthrug. The center table wore a petticoat, and every bit of brocaded upholstery was frosted with antimacassars. The walls were lined with shelves and shelves of glassed-in books and bits of statuary.

In a moment Wilma Lindquist strode into the room and flung her arms around Julie. Over Wilma's shoulder Julie saw Miss Tinsley, a fluttery old lady with flying white hair.

"I was most worried, my dear. I can't tell you how glad I was when I found young Ben Van Kirk had taken you in tow, and now he tells me you've found your brother after his unfortunate accident. How is he?"

"He'll be leaving the hospital today."

"Fine, fine, and then you can be together. Ben told me that you had found a place to stay but that it isn't entirely satisfactory. I do hope you and your brother will find a pleasant place to set up housekeeping. Oh, excuse me, I must introduce you to my hostess, Miss Tinsley." She turned and raised her voice. "Harriet, this is the young lady I told you about who was my traveling companion across the continent. We became such good friends. This is my dear Julie, Miss Jameson, all the way from Washington Territory."

Julie put out her hand for a quick firm squeeze.

"Why?" Miss Tinsley asked.

"Why?"

"Why did you come all the way to New York City?"

"I'd always wanted to come here. My mother was a New Yorker."

"Speak up," Wilma warned. "She's quite deaf."

"My mother was a New Yorker," Julie repeated in a louder tone.

"Really? What was her name? Perhaps I knew her."

Wilma explained, "Miss Tinsley belongs to an old, old New York family."

Julie turned to Wilma. "I doubt if she knew my mother. I've just found out she worked as a maid."

"What? What's that?" Miss Tinsley screeched.

"Her mother was a maid!"

"Why are you looking so embarrassed?" Miss Tinsley demanded of Julie. "My grandmother was a maid, when she first came over from the old country. This is a democracy, young lady. Scratch any member of society in Gotham and you'll find a peasant. Sit down."

She pushed past both of them to the most comfortable chair. "Miss Jameson, sit there where I can see you. Wilma, ring for the sherry."

Glass of sherry in hand, Miss Tinsley looked as if she might doze off at any moment. She sat there, gently rocking, eyes half-closed, while Julie told Wilma about Jared's hard times and his finding a job with his uncle. "It's not a very nice job, but I guess it will have to do, for the present." At last she found an opportunity to ask Wilma if her friend would know the Babcock family.

"What family, my dear?" Wilma asked.

"The Babcocks."

"The Babcocks!" Miss Tinsley's eyes flew open. She had not been asleep at all. "You mean that young whippersnapper who's going to run for mayor?"

"Vaughn Babcock," said Julie.

"I guess that's his name. Old Wilbur Babcock's nephew. Oh, I knew Wilbur Babcock well at one time. Now, there was a nobody who pulled himself up by the bootstraps. I remember the first time I saw him. It was at a ball, at the Academy of Music. Talk about your Boss Tweed or your Jim Fisk. He was one of them. Only worse. Handsome, oh yes, but a brash, conceited nobody. He made a pile of money, nobody knows quite how, but there were some shenanigans, that's for sure. Anyhow, he married into society and built that house. One decent thing he did was work for emancipation. Used to help runaway slaves, hid them in his house, till his wife put a stop to it. She was a real Tory."

The secret place, thought Julie—could it have been a passageway down to his room? They had guessed that Malvina Wintz now had that room.

"Old Wilbur Babcock was a wily one, but he wasn't all bad. Never did have any children. And when his no-good brother went to pot—his wife died in childbirth—Wilbur raised his nephew. His brother wasn't half as smart as Wilbur, just a good-looking weakling. Now what was his name?" She pondered a moment. "Oh, yes. Jared. Jared Babcock."

Julie endeavored not to change her expression, but for a few moments she heard nothing of Miss

Tinsley's chatter. If what she and Ben had guessed was true, was it not possible that a child could have been named for his paternal grandfather?

Miss Tinsley was saying, "I never believed Wilbur Babcock committed suicide. It wasn't like him."

"When was that suicide, anyhow?" Wilma asked.

Miss Tinsley frowned. "How can you expect me to recall something that happened twenty or thirty years ago?"

"From what I've heard," Julie said carefully, "it was after 1848, I'm quite sure."

"It *was* 1848!" Miss Tinsley sat up straighter. "That was the very year. I remember. That was the year we held the first women's-rights convention, up at Seneca Falls. Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Oh, I remember 1848 very well. We'd just come back from our summer at the shore. It was early in October, in all the papers. More sherry, Wilma."

Now they were getting close to things Julie wanted to know. When Miss Tinsley paused for breath, Julie said thoughtfully, "I wonder where Vaughn Babcock went to school."

"School? That one?" Miss Tinsley snorted. "He never had the brains. He started working for his uncle before he was dry behind the ears. And got into politics, too."

Then he had lied to Malvina Wintz. He had known Mama. And his father's name had been Jared. And Mama had been in trouble. But if Jared Jameson was his son, how could Babcock have sent those men after him?

"It's good Vaughn Babcock's wife and daughter are abroad this summer. She's a nice woman, I hear, poor thing, if she did marry him for his money. The daughter's homely as mud. All this dirty politicking. Oh, I've had enough of the Babcocks. I hope he won't be mayor."

"He won't!" Wilma declared. "Not after the *Bugle* gets through with him. God bless the *Bugle*. And Ben Van Kirk."

Yes, indeed, thought Julie.

"That Van Kirk family was a fine one," Miss Tinsley mused. "Of course, this boy's father lost his shirt in the Civil War, and meantime his two older brothers got killed. Ben was too young, and then he had to take care of his mother. She's gone now. He's a bright boy, but he'll never get rich running his legs off for the *Bugle*."

She gave a big sigh, put the empty sherry glass down on the cabriolet beside her, leaned her head against the back of the chair, and fell sound asleep.

Wilma put her finger to her lips, and a moment later she and Julie tiptoed out of the room.

Julie said goodbye to Wilma as quickly as she

could without seeming rude. She must get back and explore that secret place.

There was the sound of a band as she walked toward Broadway, and when she turned the corner she discovered a parade in progress.

Her mother had told her of the many wonderful parades in New York, and here one was. Horses with plumes, and a big brass band, the men in wonderful red uniforms, tooting and blaring away, "Ach du Lieber Augustine" and "Watch on the Rhine," others marching and singing, and then another band. She would have loved to watch it all, but the sidewalks were crowded and it was hard to see. She could only catch glimpses by standing on her tiptoes.

"Like me to lift you up, dolly?" a man asked.

She pushed her way through the crowd, away from him.

A half block farther someone grabbed her arm and dragged her toward the swinging doors of a saloon. With her other hand she slapped her reticule against the man's face, and he let go.

Now the crowd was thinning, and she could move more quickly. The sky seemed unusually dark for midafternoon. Soon thunder boomed and everyone started running or standing in doorways. Umbrellas flopped open and turned into a river of lily pads floating up and down the street.

Julie never had seen such a downpour; it was as if the sky were equipped with a thousand water-

spouts. Back home it just drizzled; it never was like this.

Only two more blocks to go, but by the time she reached the house she was soaked to her underwear, and her tired old shoes were oozing water.

For once, thank goodness, Malvina Wintz was not at her place at the window.

Safe in her room, Julie took off her wet outer clothes and hung them on the bedposts to dry, wiped her hands and feet and wrapped a towel around her head.

Two hours until time to meet Ben and Jared. She wished it were sooner. But in the meantime there was work to do.

She rested for only a few minutes, then opened the shutters wide. The storm had passed, and the sun was out again, low enough in the western sky to cast its rays into the room. If she wanted daylight, she would have to hurry.

Carefully she pushed aside the dresses in the armoire. This time she could see the dusty green baize material tacked to the back, which pulled loose quite easily.

By the time she had opened the inside door she realized that the daylight was of little help. The space beyond was quite dark.

She crawled into it, feeling her way as if she were a blind person. Softly, from below, came the sound of Malvina and Vaughn talking. Julie could

feel dust, endless dust, and it was hard not to sneeze. It took only a few minutes for her to conclude that it was a small, square, low-ceilinged room. Except for the entrance through the armoire, it appeared to be completely sealed off. Was there nothing in it, nothing at all?

Her foot stumbled against something. She bent down and discovered the outline of a small box.

"Julie, are you home?" Rose's voice.

Julie tiptoed toward the sound, into the armoire, and out into her room.

Rose was standing in the open doorway. *I should have locked the door*, thought Julie, *but I was so wet and in such a hurry!*

"What on earth are you doin' in there? That's a mighty big armoire, but there wouldn't be room for me!"

"I was looking for something."

"You're covered with dust."

Julie brushed at herself, thinking, *I won't confide in Rose. Not while she's being friendly to Mr. Babcock. Anyhow, I want to know about that box, all by myself, before I tell anyone about it.*

Rose was bundled up in a baby-blue morning dress trimmed with baby-blue feathers. Obviously new. Julie felt exceedingly grubby.

Before Rose could make any further comment, Julie said, "I saw the show last night. You were wonderful."

"Why, thanks!" Rose fluffed the blue feathers nervously. "Ben took you, eh?"

Julie nodded. "And to dinner at the Bismarck Hofbrau."

Rose grinned. " 'Course he did. I've eaten there so often I can't stand the smell of sauerkraut. But Ben has credit there, and since Ben never has no money . . ." There was a hint of jealousy in her deprecation.

"He took me to Delmonico's afterward," Julie went on. "We had oysters and champagne!"

"You did, eh?" Rose's eyebrows went up. "I was at Ruppert's. It's real high-class. Delmonico's is getting rather common."

"Mr. Babcock took you?"

"Howdja know?"

"Ben told me how you met him the night before. How he helped you get the part."

Suddenly Rose's manner changed. She swung around and looked out the window, her shoulders dejected. At last she said, "I'm not playin' up to Babcock just for myself, Julie. Though that's part of it. I hafta do it if I'm gonna get anywhere. But I'm doin' it for Ben, too. And it ain't easy. Not with that hawk-eyed Malvina around. Babcock himself's not so bad. I mean he ain't so bad-looking, and he's a gent. I don't like his eyes. But anyhow, the worst is Malvina. If she gets wise."

Julie listened in shocked, speechless amazement.

"I'd move out right now, but that would make her really suspicious. Anyhow, when you see Ben, tell him I did my best last night but I didn't learn much. I tried to get Babcock real drunk, he don't hold his liquor too good. But it didn't work. Tell Ben I ain't stopped tryin', though."

At last Julie found her voice. "How can you stand Mr. Babcock, Rose?"

The girl turned around. She was blinking tears from her lashes.

"Who are you to talk? He took you ridin' yesterday. He told me."

I've confided too much all ready, Julie thought. *I've got to hold my tongue.* Whatever she said now, Rose would think that her relationship to Vaughn Babcock was similar to Rose's own—whatever that was.

Then Rose said, "Ben tells me you found that brother of yours."

Julie nodded. "Did he tell you the whole story? That it was Babcock's men?"

"You'll have a hard time provin' it."

"I'm going to try."

Rose sighed. "Look, Julie, I been around here all my life. I can take care of myself with the roughest of 'em. I've been mixed up with bad folks all my life, count of I'm not exactly an angel myself. But you, you don't know what you're get-

tin' into. You got your brother safe, why not skip town, the two of you?"

Julie lifted her chin, trying not to feel ridiculous there in her underclothes with the soot on her face. "I'm not leaving town until this is settled. Neither is Jared. We're not cowards."

"No, you're not," Rose said thoughtfully. "Just fools."

She walked to the door, then stopped and turned around. "What I come in to ask you, Julie, was to get Ben to bring you backstage to a party tonight. Before the show. You are seein' Ben tonight, ain't you?"

Julie nodded.

"Then tell him. Save him the price of your dinner. And Julie, if you don't mind my asking, you don't got much clothes, do you?"

"Why?"

"I thought maybe I could loan you somethin' to wear. I got a dress I'm too fat for."

Rose was determined to be her friend. It was impossible to stop her. With chagrin Julie remembered the "valentine" dress.

"That's very kind of you," she said shyly.

"All right, then, I'll bring it round. After we've both washed up. That's for you, 'specially." Rose laughed. Then, with her hand on the knob, she added, "Don't get too fond of Ben, kiddo. He'll never be able to afford a wife."

She opened the door quickly and closed it behind her.

Julie stepped forward to lock the door. What a strange creature Rose was! Behaving the way she did, yet being jealous of Ben. Why, all he was doing was helping a stranger in the big city, being kind. He was such a nice person.

Here she was blushing. Thank goodness there was no one to see.

But there wasn't time to speculate on her feelings for one Ben Van Kirk. She must get back to the hidden room.

She had just picked up the box, when she heard below her a terrible yelp from Gigi and Malvina screaming, "Get out of the way, you little beast!"

The dog whimpered, there was a slap and then the sound Julie had heard that first night, a human whimpering, and another slap, and Vaughn's voice, "Leave that dog alone!" and then, after a moment, "I'm going to the theater now." A door closed.

Julie let go the box, crawled back into her room, unlocked her door, and peeked over the banister. There was no one in sight. She went back into her room, locked the door behind her, ran to the window, and looked down just in time to see Vaughn Babcock go through one side of the tiny garden and disappear, as if into the wall.

There was another entrance to the theater, just as there was to the Opera House that Rose had described. Something else to tell Ben!

Now for the box.

Again she crawled through, and this time she brought the box back with her. She lit the gas lamp and pulled up the one chair near to the light. The box was very old, very dusty, covered with faded blue leather.

She dipped a handkerchief into the water pitcher and wiped the top of the box. There were faint, once-gold initials. *V.M.*

At first she was puzzled. *V.* Did that stand for Vaughn? No, the second initial, definitely was an *M*, not a *B*. She stared at it for a moment, and then she remembered. Her mother's real name had been Virginia. Virginia Mahone, of course.

There was the tiny keyhole, locked and rusted.

Her hand flew to her throat, touched the pendant, touched the keyhole again.

She took the chain from her neck and dislodged the key. It was exactly the right size, but it would not turn. She looked around her wildly, then ran for her jar of mutton tallow and camphor gum, which she nightly rubbed into her hands, the only possible lubricant in her possession.

The shadows grew longer. Any moment Rose would be back with the dress. Julie rubbed the key, rubbed the lock, tried again and again. Then,

just before she gave up hope entirely, the key slipped in and turned.

The box creaked open. Inside was a folded piece of parchment. That was all.

With trembling hands she unfolded it, held it close to the gas lamp.

It was a wedding certificate for Virginia Mahone and Vaughn Babcock.

Chapter NINE

FOR A MOMENT she forgot her hurry, she forgot her fears.

Mama was vindicated, whatever anyone said. Her "trouble" had not been what Uncle Kiley had imagined. Mama had been married. But someone had sent her packing. Who? Wilbur Babcock or his nephew?

Vaughn Babcock must have guessed that Jared was his son. Yet he had sent those men after him, tried to scare him away. How could he have been so cruel?

Mama had called it the key to her heart. She must have loved Vaughn Babcock. No, everything was not solved, not yet.

There was a knock on the door.

"Yes?"

"It's me. Rose. I've got the dress."

"Oh dear, I'm not washed yet. Can you come back in a minute?"

"All right. But you better hurry." The footsteps faded.

First Julie thought of keeping the wedding certificate with her. But somebody might steal it. She couldn't take her big reticule with her in the evening, only her sewing kit, for a pretend evening bag.

The certificate had been safe in its little box for twenty-two years. It would be safe again there, for a little while. She would tell Ben about it, and he would know what to do.

She put the certificate in the box, locked it once more, replaced the box in the little room, and again hung the key around her neck. She was just fastening it, when Rose again knocked on the door.

"You ain't washed yet?" were Rose's first words. "What are you doin', practicin' to be a chimney sweep or somethin'?"

Julie stared at the dress that Rose had spread across the bed. It was the most fashionable gown she could imagine—black taffeta with a jerked-up overskirt revealing a red petticoat.

"It's got a high lace collar, see?" Rose pointed out. "Real ladylike. And these are for your hair." She held out some red velvet roses that matched

the petticoat. "I'll rat your hair for you, real good, so we can pin these on."

"Rose, it's beautiful!"

"Hurry and wash and try it on. I'll come back with my rat-tailed comb."

After she was dressed and Rose had arranged her hair before dashing off to the theater, Julie stood in front of the mirror and looked at herself with amazement and satisfaction. Her only regrets were her shoes, cracked and still damp, and that horrid old shawl.

What would Ben think of her? Would he recognize the dress?

But this was no time for vanity. She must hurry!

There was no sign of Miss Wintz, thank goodness, as Julie tiptoed down the stairs and closed the front door behind her.

The twilight sky was clear with the ghosts of stars above the chimneypots. But a stiff wind was blowing. If only she had a veil to tie over her carefully arranged hair! Instead she kept one hand on top the velvet roses.

To reach the Bismarck Hofbrau she had to cross Broadway. As she stood on the curb, waiting for a break in the parade of carriages and clutching her taffeta skirt against the wind, a newspaper blew across her feet. It was the *Bugle*. Curious, she bent and picked it up and moved a step nearer to one of the street lamps.

"Do you want this gentleman for mayor?" the

headline asked. Below was a cartoon of a tall, thin man with a very long nose, a pious expression, and a halo over his head. Behind him was a hodgepodge of unpleasant details—men with clubs, a smirking, full-bosomed woman, men drinking from bottles or holding playing cards in their hands, and little devils. And there was a forked tail coming out from the cape that the man was wearing.

> Do you want a man who gives a once fine mansion, his own ancestral home, to a woman of ill-repute? Do you want a man who pretends to be an upstanding, church-going father? Who makes a show of giving to the poor but who makes his money in nefarious real-estate schemes that rob those same poor, and lines his own pockets with their hard-earned pay? Do you want a man who hires thugs to beat up innocent victims who perhaps may reveal the truth about him?
>
> If you do, cast your vote for one VILLAINOUS BEEZLEBUB, otherwise known as Mr. V.B.

In the dim light from the street lamp she did not try to read any more. She dropped the paper into the gutter.

So her information had helped Ben. But the

article was so bold and so pointed that anyone would recognize Vaughn Babcock as the target. And he was a dangerous man.

"May I help you across the street?"

She looked up, startled, and shook her head to a stranger. At the next opening between carriages she stepped from the curb and made her way to the other side. Hurry. Hurry to Ben and Jared and safety.

The Bismarck Hofbrau was on a street almost as dark as Opal Street. She could see the lights in the restaurant's small leaded-glass windows, from a block away. Would Jared have got there all right? He must still be weak, and if Babcock's men knew he was leaving the hospital they might have followed him. She ran faster, past the shuttered houses. An old beggarwoman held out a hand, and Julie paused to reach into her little pouch and find a coin. A drunk lurched toward her, also with hand extended, and she shook her head and moved on.

A ragged dog, its ribs showing through its patchy fur, skulked along, sniffing the ground. She looked at it pityingly, watched it flee from her glance into an alley. The dog disappeared, and she started running again. There were footsteps behind her, coming out of the alley.

Suddenly she was seized from behind.

She gave a little cry before a hand covered her mouth and she was dragged into the alley.

There must be more than one man; her arms were pinioned behind her, and then she was knocked to the ground, face down.

"Hold still," a rough voice commanded. "Hold still till I get you tied up, or I'll give you what for."

She did not hold still. She struggled to get to her feet and was again knocked down. Then she heard a window open, and she could glimpse a panel of light and in it her assailant's face, in the one moment before he jerked her out of the light and farther down the alley. He had one crazy eye. It must be the man called Cocky! Again she screamed and there came the sound of running feet.

Cocky—if that was who it was—flung her against a wall and turned toward whoever was following him. Despite the semidarkness, she recognized the shape of the silhouette.

"Ben!" she cried. "Ben, be careful!"

"Run to the Hofbrau, Julie! Run! Get your brother!"

Then his fist crashed into the other man's jaw.

Ben went on calling out, "Run! Run! Run!"

She obeyed him. She ran for her life.

Jared was at a table just inside the Hofbrau and jumped to his feet as she burst in the door.

Breathless, she threw herself into his arms.

"Julie, what happened? What is it? Your friend Ben went outside to watch for you!"

She pulled her face away. She was still panting,

but she managed, "Jared, hurry, the alley—that man. That Cocky. I'll find a policeman."

They went outside, the proprietor at their heels. She pointed out the alley to Jared. Mr. Schmidt put two fingers in his mouth and whistled sharply.

Julie leaned against the side of the building and closed her eyes. Was this the way you felt when you were going to faint? She could hear more whistles, doors and windows opening, more people running. At last she opened her eyes.

Down the block, at the entrance to the alley, she could see Jared and Ben and a crowd of others. She moved toward them slowly.

When she came closer she saw that the man who had attacked her was handcuffed to a policeman and that the policeman was talking to Jared. They were surrounded by curious passersby.

"Julie!" Ben came toward her. "Are you all right?"

"I'm all right. Just shaken."

"I don't wonder." He put his hands on her shoulders and frowned.

"Ben, was it the same man?"

"The same. Jared identified him."

"Good." She wavered a little, and he pulled her against him and held her close.

"Oh, Julie, Julie, I began worrying about you as soon as the paper came out. I realized that I'd dragged you into something dreadful, that Babcock might send his men after you. I was late get-

ting to the Hofbrau, and when you hadn't appeared, I began to worry more, and I came out to watch for you. I was about to go to Opal Street, when I saw him grab you. Oh, Julie, I'm so sorry I got you into this."

She lifted her face. "But you didn't get me into anything! I got myself in!"

He bent and kissed her, very gently, on the lips.

"If I can help it, Julie, I'm not going to let you out of my sight again."

She had been kissed before, in the games they played at the Saturday-night parties back home —silly games like spin the bottle and post office. This was different, so different. This was Prince Charming galloping up from nowhere to kill the dragons of doubt. She forgot everything except the warm feeling of his mustache against her cheek.

Someone touched her shoulder. She did not move. Then she heard Jared's voice. "Excuse me."

Reluctantly she turned.

Jared's round blue eyes were full of surprise. His smile was embarrassed. "You all right, Julie?"

"Oh, yes, yes! Oh, I'm fine."

"Your face is dirty."

"And bruised," Ben added gently. "Let's get you to Mrs. Schmidt."

Mrs. Schmidt took Julie upstairs to her flat so that she could wash her face and hands and fix

her hair. With clucking sympathy she rubbed a homemade ointment on Julie's bruises.

Julie came down a few moments later to join Ben and Jared in one of the booths, and Mr. Schmidt brought them steins of beer. For the first few moments no one could think of anything to say. Ben stared at Julie with a kind of wonder in his eyes, and she found it difficult to take her eyes from his and turn to her brother.

Jared's expression, which had been increasingly perplexed ever since the first moment of reunion in New York, seemed to have reached the maximum of amazement. He was the first to speak.

"Julie, where on earth did you get that dress?"

"It isn't mine. Rose, one of the girls at the rooming house, loaned it to me."

"It's beautiful on you," said Ben.

"It's awfully grown-up," Jared muttered.

Ben raised his beer stein. "Here's to curtains for Cocky. At least he'll be locked up."

They all clinked steins.

"And Vaughn Babcock can never be mayor, after what you wrote in the *Bugle*," Julie added.

"We hope not."

Jared frowned. "I still don't know why he sent his men after me. Or after Julie."

"My story was the cause of their going after Julie, I'm sorry to say," Ben said quietly. He turned to her, and she knew that the moment had

come when she must bring Jared up to date. She looked at her brother anxiously. Had he recovered enough to stand the truth?

"Jared," she asked, "didn't Uncle Kiley tell you anything about all this when he came to see you in the hospital?"

"He was only there a few minutes. He just talked about me. About my getting well and how he might help me get a better job."

"He didn't tell you that this man Vaughn Babcock is a member of the 'important' family who owned the house where Mama worked as a maid?"

"Mama must have stolen an awful lot of money." Jared's eyes widened. "But it's hard to believe."

"A lot of things have been hard to believe." Julie picked up the beer stein and set it down again, concentrating on the pattern of wet rings on the wooden table. "At first I couldn't believe Mama had been a maid. Now I do. It's harder to imagine her a thief. I could have slapped Uncle Kiley when he told me the Babcocks sent her away because she was in the family way." She glanced at her brother and then hurried on. "Then Wilma's friend Miss Tinsley—she did know the Babcocks, Ben—she even knew that Vaughn Babcock's father's name was Jared." She paused and looked up at her brother's pale face. "It's all right. I found out this afternoon that Mama was married to Vaughn Babcock."

The moment of embarrassment was lessened by the arrival of other customers in the Hofbrau. Julie watched her brother—straightforward, honest, plain-and-simple Jared, shaken by what she had had to tell him, trying to adjust his mind to all the implications. He looked at Julie with sad, round eyes.

"But he is such a bad man," he said quietly.

"Maybe he wasn't then."

Another silence, until Ben asked, "Who told you they were married, Julie?"

"Nobody told me. I found the marriage certificate."

"What? Where?" they cried in unison.

"Ben, remember my telling you about that secret walled-off room behind the armoire, where I eavesdropped? I found the certificate there this afternoon, in a little box. And this opened it!"

Triumphantly she lifted the little key from under the high lace collar and dangled it toward the candlelight.

"Julie, let's see that certificate!" Ben sat forward.

"Oh, I don't have it with me. I put it back in the box and locked it up again."

"Why, why on earth?" Jared demanded.

"Somebody might have taken it from me," she defended herself.

"Julie, you go back and get it. This minute!" Jared was his old self.

"Wait a minute," Ben insisted. "We've got to think this out and plan. We're not out of the woods yet."

Mr. Schmidt brought another round of beer, and the three of them leaned forward over the table.

"I know the certificate is important to you, Jared," Ben said. "It's important to me, too, and to the *Bugle*. We've revealed only part of the Babcock story. We've got to get it all, all the bits and pieces. Not only for the exposé, but for both your sakes. None of us will rest easy until every last shred of mystery is destroyed. Will we?"

Julie and Jared shook their heads.

"We've got to figure some way for Julie to sneak into the house and get it, while we keep an eye on the place. Is there a back door, Julie?"

"Oh Ben, I forgot to tell you! There's some kind of passage from the house to the theater. I saw Vaughn Babcock in the back garden and he just disappeared, into a wall. Just after I'd heard him say he was going to the theater."

"Marvelous," said Ben. "Absolutely marvelous."

"It must go backstage," she went on. "Oh, there's still something else I forgot to tell you."

"What now?" He smiled.

"The party. Backstage. Before the show. Rose invited us."

"Ideal," said Ben.

Again they bent like three conspirators over the table, talking in low voices as the crowd in the Hofbrau thickened. They could make an appearance at the party, they could decide the best way for Julie to get into the house. There would be three of them.

"Four," Jared told them. "I'm going after Uncle Kiley."

"Will you be safe alone?" Julie asked.

"Julie!" Jared was indignant. The color had returned to his face. He was more like the brother she remembered from back home. "Uncle Kiley's a smart man. I know he can help."

"And he has every reason to despise Babcock," Ben added. "I'm sure he's tangled with him more than once. By all means get your uncle."

Mr. Schmidt was beside them, menu in hand. "Mrs. Schmidt just now she finish writing this. I vould recommend—"

"Sorry," Ben told him. "No dinner tonight. We've work to do."

"No dinner?"

"Later, maybe."

They drained their beer glasses and exchanged glances.

They found a carriage for Jared at the corner, and then Julie and Ben walked down Broadway.

When they turned in to the alley to the stage door entrance, Ben took her hand. They did not speak until they reached the door.

"Julie, stick close by me, won't you?" Now he held both her hands.

"Oh, yes! Yes!"

The magic of his touch almost made her forget their plot and the danger that lay ahead of them. He had kissed her, he had said, "If I can help it, I'm not going to let you out of my sight again." Was that Ben Van Kirk's way of saying "I love you"?

"These parties can get pretty wild, Julie. Even parties before the show. They get keyed up. They're a rather rough lot. And you're so pretty."

"I was there alone, two nights ago," she reminded him.

"I know. I hate to think about it."

His face was over hers, when someone brushed past and the door opened and enveloped them in a flood of light. His lips brushed the tip of her nose. He sighed and whispered, "Back to work."

They opened the door to a blaze of candlelight and a cacophony of noise. A man with a mandolin, a little chipmunk of a creature, was playing, "Just before the Battle, Mother," and everyone was laughing. Some were in costume, some were not. Girls disappeared in and out of dressing rooms, adjusting stockings, pausing by the long

table for a sip of champagne or a piece of roast turkey.

Julie and Ben made their way to the refreshment table, clinked glasses, and looked around for Rose.

"Stay right here," Ben said. "I'll see if she's in her dressing room."

Conversations flowed about her, some quite meaningless. Theater talk about Edwin Forrest and Dion Bouccicault, speculations as to how long the Black Crook would run, and several comments as to the future of "The Shepherdess." Then Rose herself appeared, from the opposite direction of her dressing room.

"Julie, I had your hair so nice!" she cried in greeting. "What happened?"

"I had a little accident." Julie tried to be offhand. "I'll tell you about it later."

She couldn't help staring at Rose, who was wearing pink gauze over an enormous hoopskirt. There were tiers and tiers of ruffles. Her gloves were embroidered with pearls, and on top the high coils of her red hair was a diadem, sparkling with imitation diamonds.

Rose twirled around. "Howdja like it? I'm comin' out first thing in this, first thing the curtain goes up and sing, 'Goodbye, Sweetheart, Goodbye!'"

"Miss Cassidy!" someone called. "Hey, Shep-

herdess!" and Rose was gone, calling back over her shoulder, "Help yourself to supper, Julie!"

Julie took one step away from the spot where Ben had told her to wait and put a slice of turkey and a bit of jelly on a plate. She shook her head to the waiter behind the table when he offered more champagne. She must keep her wits about her this night.

Mingled with the actors and actresses were men in evening clothes, with gold stickpins and glittering cufflinks. Their eyes followed the plump chorus girls as they darted in and out of the dressing room. Now and then she would catch one of them regarding her with curiosity, and she would turn her head and look for Ben. He had been gone only a few moments, but it seemed forever.

She heard one of the "gentlemen" guests say to another, "Oh-oh. I didn't expect him to make an appearance tonight.

Julie turned to see where they were looking and followed their eyes up the short flight of stairs to the office. There Babcock stood, cigar in hand, dapper, imperious, looking out over the crowded room, as a king might look down on the rabble.

He appeared to be looking for someone. Rose? Or herself? She wished now she had not borrowed such an elaborate dress. She turned around and pretended to be studying the supper table, again shaking her head to the proffered champagne.

When she looked back, Vaughn Babcock had disappeared from the top of the steps.

She sighed with relief. At last she spotted Ben, just outside Rose's dressing room. A man was blocking his way, talking earnestly into his ear. Now and then Ben would try to edge away, but the man moved more quickly. Ben looked exceedingly annoyed, but she could tell he was endeavoring to be patient. Should she go over to him, or should she stay where he had told her to wait?

As she hesitated she saw, to her dismay, that Vaughn Babcock had not gone back into his office but had come down to mingle with the crowd. They might have been gossiping about him and about the *Bugle* story, but now he was receiving polite nods. After all, since he did own the theater, performers would be obliged to be polite. But as he moved through the party each group watched him for a moment, before putting heads together once more and whispering.

Julie took a step toward the corner where she had seen Ben. Just a step, endeavoring not to look toward Vaughn Babcock.

She felt a hand on her arm and stiffened.

"Good evening, Miss Jameson."

There was nothing to do but turn and face him. "Good evening, Mr. Babcock." Her lips were stiff.

His expression was polite, almost formal, but the façade of charm was completely negated by his cold eyes.

"You're looking beautiful tonight," he went on, in a silky voice that could scarcely have been overheard in all that babble. "That is a ravishing gown." He surveyed her with a mingle of admiration and contempt. His eyes lingered on her broken shoes.

She was hot with embarrassment and a little afraid.

He was close enough for her to smell his breath, and now she noticed that he was wavering a little and she recalled Rose's saying that he could not hold his liquor. If only Ben would come back. She glanced in his direction and saw he was still cornered by the same man.

"I am surprised, Miss Jameson, to find that you have remained in New York."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"I was under the impression that you had not been enjoying yourself particularly, that you had run into a series of unpleasant incidents in the big city."

"I have. But I'm still here. And I'm still at number three Opal Street."

"Indeed."

"I have two nights left, all paid for. But I may leave sooner."

"I believe you will, my dear."

She moved away from him, and he took hold of her arm. "What have you been doing, little

lady, since our tea party yesterday afternoon in the park?"

Anyone listening could not have detected anything beyond companionable charm.

If only she could pour out all she knew about him, and her hate. But she had to be cautious. She must get back into the house and retrieve that certificate. Still, she was not going to let him think he was fooling her.

"I've been talking to people. Different people. And listening and learning, Mr. Babcock."

"Ah, the sleuth again. On the trail of your mother. Poor child, after all these years it's quite futile. Useless."

She looked at him directly, angry now, so that her caution slipped. "Is it futile? Is it useless?"

He gripped her arm more tightly. "I think it's time we had another talk, Miss Jameson." He did not let go of her arm; he was moving her with him. The more she tried to jerk away, the tighter his grip became.

There was no sign of Ben. People were looking at them, of course, but their curiosity was mild.

A voice cried, "Curtain! Curtain! First call!" and the green room turned into a tangled shouting melee. There was no chance of getting away from him now. She cried, "Stop it! Stop it! Let me go!" but no one heard her.

As the overture blasted through the theater he

dragged her up the steps and shoved her into his office. He let go of her, slammed the door, and stood with his back to it.

"Let me out of here!" she screamed at him. "Let me out, this minute!"

"Keep quiet." He slapped her across the face.

Chapter TEN

SHE WAS so angry that she forgot the last shred of caution.

"How dare you! How dare you! You were married to my own mother!"

His mouth hung open. He looked suddenly older, and weary. "Would you mind," he asked hoarsely, "repeating that preposterous statement?"

Her fear seemed to have vanished with her anger. "It's not preposterous," she said quietly. "You were married to my mother, Virginia Mahone."

He stepped to his desk and with a shaking hand poured a glass of liquor from the decanter. He took a swallow, set the glass on the desk.

"How strange that you didn't mention it the other day."

"I didn't know it then."

"What makes you so positive now?"

He had softened. She had touched upon a vulnerable spot. Perhaps speaking frankly would stand to her advantage.

"I've seen the wedding certificate."

Unconsciously her fingers went to the little gold key, and his eyes followed the gesture.

He lifted the glass to his lips and drained the contents.

"The little blue leather box," he said softly. "Where is it? Where did you find it? I thought she had taken it with her."

She did not answer. She took a step back toward the door. Thank goodness he had not locked it.

"Wait, child. Don't go yet. Don't go running to that newspaper friend of yours and tell him everything."

She raised her eyebrows and drew herself up to her full dignity. "Why should I want to tell anyone what you did to my poor mother?"

He rubbed his hand over his face and sank into his chair. "Please sit down," he said after a moment. "I'm not really a villain. Let me tell you what happened. You have a right to know. And if you know the truth you may stop this relentless prying."

She perched on a chair close to the door, curiosity outweighing prudence.

He did not look at her but stared into the empty

blackened grate of the ornate fireplace. Never had she heard a sadder voice or seen a sadder face.

"It was a summer idyll. We were scarcely more than children ourselves. I was eighteen and your poor, sweet mother no more than seventeen. So young! So pretty! My uncle was away for the summer. The house was empty and lonely. I used to wander through the rooms where the furniture was draped like ghosts. I don't remember exactly why I was alone. Perhaps I'd quarreled with my uncle. We often quarreled. At any rate I was alone, except for the cook and for little Ginny.

"I found her one day in the back garden. She was picking flowers, and I startled her. She knew that to pick the flowers was strictly forbidden to the servants. Uncle Wilbur had hired a gardener who had arranged for the most lavish, difficult-to-grow blossoms he could find. Uncle Wilbur wanted the garden to be a showplace when he entertained. He was a widower by then and getting more and more old-maidish.

"I pretended to chastise her, and she cried, and then I felt so bad I picked her a bouquet myself and invited her to go for a ride in my carriage."

Watching him, Julie was almost able to imagine the young Vaughn Babcock, a different man, a lonely boy seeing a pretty girl in tears and being kind.

"That was the beginning," he went on. "I gave her money for dresses and bonnets. I remember how she wouldn't accept it at first, until I dangled in front of her invitations to the theater, to the Hippodrome, to Barnum's Museum, to dinner—for which, of course, she had no proper clothes. It was all secretive but quite innocent. Cook mustn't know. Her family musn't know. She was living in, so that part was easy, as long as we avoided seeing any of them or any of my friends when we went out. I chose plays I knew my friends had already attended, kept watch on the social calendar of the day so we wouldn't meet anyone I knew. And we were lucky. It was all in fun. Ginny was having such a good time, it was infectious."

Julie thought of her mother's stories. She had spoken of all that gaiety as if it had been a way of life; yet it had all taken place in one summer.

"One summer," he said, as if he had read her thoughts.

"Why was it a secret marriage?" Julie asked.

He turned his head. "Why, it had to be." He sounded surprised and flustered. "We were underage. My uncle never would have approved. Ginny was a good girl. She insisted on a wedding ring. I was so much in love I wasn't thinking of the consequences. It was the only way she would come to me. I guess I was foolish enough to hope that eventually I could explain to Uncle Wilbur."

"Then why did you send her away?" Julie prodded.

"I didn't!" He jumped to his feet. "I didn't. It was Uncle Wilbur's doing. He sent me off on a business trip for him, upstate, for two weeks. When I came home he called me into his study and told me Ginny had run away, that it was good riddance to bad rubbish, that he didn't want her in the house. I didn't stop to protest that we were married. I went after her. I didn't believe him. You see, I was sure of my Ginny. But her brother would tell me nothing. Time after time I went to see Kiley Mahone, and he turned me away. For days I tried to find her, for weeks, and then at last Kiley Mahone told me that Ginny had married someone else and gone out West.

"I was stunned and confused, and furious with my uncle. For the first time in my life I really stood up to him. I went to him and told him Ginny and I were married. I'll never forget the crafty way he smiled at me. He had known about it. Ginny had told him. And he had told her that I had been sent abroad and that he had had the marriage annulled. He gave her money and sent her packing. I'm sure she thought I no longer loved her. Uncle Wilbur was a very powerful, frightening, and therefore persuasive person."

He looked at her hopefully. He even attempted a smile. "Now that you know the truth, can't you pity me, a little?"

He had told the truth, she was sure. But how could she feel pity for a weakling?

"My dear, I told you, it was a summer idyll. We were children. She married someone else and went away. What could I do? My hands were tied. I was completely dependent on my uncle for my bread and butter. Look, I've told you the story, you should be satisfied. But it was a long, long time ago. I can't change the past. I can't bring your mother back to life. It's over and done with, and there's nothing you can do."

The confidential mood was over. The glimpse she had had of the young Vaughn Babcock was again buried in the cruel, lined, middle-aged face of an enemy.

"Besides, my dear, you are going to turn over that certificate to me, for a large enough sum to quiet you and that brother of yours for a lifetime."

Julie gasped. She got to her feet slowly, staring at him. She was back in the present too, remembering the number of times she had been told that Babcock was a dangerous man.

"Jared," she reminded him, "is my half-brother. My half-brother and your—"

Before she could finish a door opened on the opposite side of the room. Malvina Wintz stood in the doorway. In her hand was a copy of the evening *Bugle*.

She glared at Julie. "What the devil are you doing here?"

"It's quite all right," Babcock said hastily. "I might ask you the same question, Miss Wintz. I am accustomed to having people knock before they enter my office."

"There's no need to pussyfoot, Vaughn." She flung the *Bugle* down on his desk. "Who do you think blabbed to the *Bugle*?"

"I've no explanation for this slander, but certainly we can't put the blame on Miss Jameson."

Both Malvina Wintz and Julie stared at him in surprise.

"Go ahead, be wishywashy!" Malvina snapped. "She's young and pretty, that's all that matters to you. I know you, Vaughn Babcock!"

Julie put her hand on the doorknob.

"Young woman, you are to leave my house immediately!" Miss Wintz shouted. "Is that clear? As fast as you can put together your bundle of rags. That's quite a rig you've got there. Did this fine gentleman buy it for you?"

"There is no point in making a scene," Babcock interrupted. "And no need to rush Miss Jameson."

"Vaughn, you're blind as a bat. This creature has spied on you. Spied on you and carried her vile accusations to that no-good Van Kirk, who's always hanging around the Cassidy girl. The Cassidy girl is a spy too. I'm getting rid of the two of them. Tonight."

"Now wait a minute. Let's not be hasty," he insisted.

A few hours ago he, too, had been urging Julie to leave. She guessed, now, why he had changed his tune. He didn't want her to leave before he got his hands on the certificate. Why didn't he say so?

"I assure you—I promise you, Miss Wintz—that Miss Jameson had nothing to do with the *Bugle*'s scurrilous attack, and furthermore—"

"Stop the drivel," Malvina said peremptorily. "I've seen you two together. Soft in the head again, that's you. And she's playing you for a sucker, same as the Cassidy girl, for all they can get—meantime, behind your back telling stories to that *Bugle* reporter."

Julie could stand it no longer. She stamped her foot in fury. "Miss Wintz, I've something to say to you. Something you ought to know before you go any further!"

"Julie—Miss Jameson—please," Babcock pleaded.

She went on. "What you don't know, Miss Wintz, is that Mr. Babcock here was once married to my mother."

Malvina shook her head in amazement. Her gold earrings swung from side to side. She clenched one fist until the knuckles, beside the heavy rings, were white.

"Are you trying to tell me," she asked, "that you are his daughter?"

"No, she is not my daughter!" Babcock's voice was strangely loud. "This is a cock-and-bull story she and that brother of hers cooked up together. The substance of blackmail. Her mother, as I told you, was a maid in my uncle's house. A backstairs maid, that's all. The whole story of a marriage is a crazy lie."

Julie stared at him, any shred of sympathy he might have aroused when he told the story of the marriage completely destroyed. He could not have loved her mother at all, or he could not stand there and speak that way.

Malvina seemed to have regained her composure. She spoke directly to Vaughn. Julie might as well have not been in the room.

"So that was what you and your uncle quarreled about."

"Mallie!" he warned. "Stop!"

"You never told me why you quarreled. You never told me about that woman. You were all sweet talk."

The way they were looking at each other was frightening. It was time to get out of there. Julie turned and opened the door and slammed it behind her.

Ben was standing at the foot of the steps. She hurried toward him.

"Julie, where have you been? I lost you. In one moment I lost sight of you."

His arms were around her, and she started to

cry in relief. He patted her shoulder. "Come on, Julie, we've got to hurry!"

With one arm still around her, he led her across the now almost deserted green room to the curtain that concealed Rose's dressing room. Here he sat her down on one of the stools and with a piece of cheesecloth from the dressing table wiped her tears away.

"Now, quickly, tell me what happened."

"He found me here in the crowd, while I was waiting for you. He dragged me into his office. He badgered me. And then I told him I'd found the certificate."

"Oh, no!"

"I didn't tell him where."

Ben shook his head. "Still, it's unfortunate."

She said proudly, "But I wanted him to know! I wanted him to know that I knew the truth about my mother and that he couldn't fool me any more. Now he wants the certificate."

"Of course."

"But he's not going to get it!"

"By now he must know for sure that it's in the house, Julie."

"I'll get it first!"

"It may be difficult, more difficult now than before."

A burst of applause and laughter penetrated the walls, and the orchestra in the pit struck up a loud version of "I Saw Esau Kissing Kate."

"Miss Wintz came into the office," Julie said when it was quiet again. "She had the *Bugle*, and she was furious and asked me to get my things right now and leave. So it shouldn't be any trouble at all."

"She knows about the wedding certificate too?"

Julie shook her head. "The strangest thing, when I tried to tell her about his having been married to my mother, he said it was all a pack of lies, that Jared and I had made it up!"

She had raised her voice, and Ben put his finger to his lips. "Careful, Julie. He's probably searching the theater right now. And there are plenty of his men around."

She straightened. "I'm going to get that certificate. Right away. I'm going to get it and give it to you, and you can print it on the front page of the *Bugle*, if you like. I hate him! I hate him!"

Again Ben put his finger to his lips. "It may be hard to get into the house, Julie. The maid will have to open the door for you. Malvina on your trail all the way."

"If they've left the office, I could use the back passage."

Ben looked grave. "We can see."

Hand in hand they tiptoed out of the green room. She whispered, "Ben, come here first," and led him to the little back balcony.

The wind was still blowing hard; there were no stars. They accustomed their eyes to the dark and

looked down. The back parlor, Malvina's room, was quite dark.

"If she's not still in his office, she's somewhere else in the house. The front parlor, maybe," Julie guessed aloud. "See, Ben, up there is my room. That dark gable. You can wait here, Ben, and watch. After I get the certificate, I can signal you from my window."

"How?"

She thought a moment. "I know. If I'm coming back this way, through the passage, I'll put one candle in the window. If I am afraid to come this way for any reason, I'll put two candles. If you see two, then you can come around outside, to the front of the house."

He considered a moment; then he nodded. "All right, Paul Revere." Then he held her hand a little more tightly. "I don't mean to tease, Julie. You know, you're very brave."

"I'm not brave. I'm just angry!"

He kissed her lightly on the forehead. "Take care, Julie. Oh, take care."

With Julie standing behind him, Ben knocked on the office door. There was no answer. He peeked in and signaled to her that there was nobody inside. She gave his hand a final squeeze and went in. The gaslight was still blazing. The room was full of the odor of Babcock's cigar and whiskey, and there was still a trace of Malvina's lilac perfume.

She waited until Ben had had time to reach the back balcony. Then she opened the door on the opposite side of the room.

Outside was blackness.

She went back to the desk. She must have some sort of light. She tried the drawers. Most of them were locked. Finally the last one she tried was open. No candles, but a box of matches.

Outside the door, by matchlight, she could make out a flight of stairs leading down. She blew out the match, held the railing, and moved carefully, aware of the steps creaking. What if Malvina should be waiting at the bottom? Or Vaughn?

There was another door, a heavy one. She had to strike more matches to find the great handle. She crowded the matches into her small bag and tried the door. It seemed to be locked, but when she felt around it she could discover no keyhole. So she tried it again and again, lunging her slight weight against it.

At last, with what seemed like an enormous noise, the door creaked open, and she stepped into the back garden.

Here the wind swooped down in swift little gusts into the black hole. No light from the house. She turned and saw that Ben had left the door to the balcony open a crack. She could just make out his figure. She tried several times to strike a match, but each time the wind blew it out.

She felt her way along the garden wall, scratch-

ing her fingers on the bricks, to avoid tripping over the flagstone path with its border of potted plants. The garden had seemed so small when she looked down on it, but now it stretched forever.

At last she reached the end of the wall. She was afraid to try to light any more matches. She felt to find the door, and when her hand was on the knob she waited, listening. No sound but the wind and the distant music from the Theatre Marceau.

She turned the knob slowly. The door opened, and she stepped inside and closed it behind her.

She knew immediately that she was in Malvina's room. The perfume was overwhelming. The door from the hall was ajar, and in the path of light she could see the enormous bed with its satin coverlet and the dressing table with its array of bottles and jewel boxes.

There was an immediate onslaught of sharp barks, and from one of the dark corners Gigi bounded toward her.

Julie ran to the Pekingese and seized her and held her close against her shoulder, whispering, "Sh, sh," and being rewarded by a wet tongue and happy squeaking.

Malvina's voice, from the front of the house cried, "Gigi? Gigi? What is it?"

Slowly Gigi quieted. Malvina stopped calling. Julie slipped through the half-open door and, still

holding the dog in her arms, tiptoed up the three flights of stairs.

Before she opened the door to her room she put Gigi down on the hall floor, patted her, whispered, "Go home, Gigi, go home!" and gave her a little push toward the stairs from behind. After a moment there was the sound of the tiny toenails clicking to silence.

When Julie had closed and locked her door, she lit the bedside candle. There wouldn't be time to pack her valise; the certificate was the important thing.

She pushed back the clothes and found the inner door. It was difficult to crawl through while wearing Rose's dress. The overskirt caught on a nail and she heard it rip. She would have to try to mend it before she gave it back to Rose.

In the pitch darkness it took her much longer than she expected to feel her way about the inner room. The box. Was it gone? Now she could hear Malvina talking to Gigi from below. "What was all the noise about, you bitch? What kind of a watchdog are you, barking when there's nobody and like as not keeping your mouth shut when there's trouble. Quiet!" The sound of a slap.

Julie shivered. *If she's in her bedroom, I'll have to go out the other way, and it will take Ben a lot longer to go outside and around the corner.*

Cautiously she went on feeling her way around

the room until, just before she lost the last shred of hope, she again located the little box.

With trembling hands she unfastened the chain from her throat. This time she had less difficulty with the key, and her first thought was that someone has been tampering with the lock! But no, the paper was still inside. She pulled it out, folded it into as tiny a wad as possible, and put it safely inside the bodice of her dress. Then, breathlessly, she closed and locked the box, put it back on the floor of the room, and replaced the chain around her neck.

There was no sound from below. Had Malvina gone back to the front parlor? She went to the door and opened it. Someone was in the front parlor, because she could hear voices. She would have to go the back way.

She lighted one candle and took it to the window, held it long enough for Ben to see, and then blew it out.

The wind was very loud, hurtling itself around and around the house, as if it wished to pick the house up and carry it away.

The stairs were dimly lit, but the old treads were more than vocal, no matter how she tiptoed.

When she reached the last flight she saw that the light was now burning in Malvina's room. Was Malvina there? How long would she have to wait?

She sat down on the steps, huddled against the wall so that she could not be seen. She could still hear voices from the front. Perhaps Malvina had merely left the light on in her room. There was one way to find out.

Julie said, "Meow!" three times.

Gigi came bounding and growling from the bedroom door and straight up the steps to Julie, who held her close in her arms.

If Malvina had heard the barking, she would undoubtedly admonish the dog again.

At that moment the doorbell began to ring.

Malvina, from the bedroom, called out, "Lizzie, where are you? Lizzie, get that door!" There was no response.

What if I had come to the front door? Julie wondered. *What if I had come and the maid had not answered?*

She waited, holding Gigi close.

The door to the bedroom opened wide. Julie could see Malvina as she came out, still screaming for the maid as she walked toward the front of the house.

Julie let go of the Pekingese and ran for the bedroom, with the dog at her heels, barking excitedly. She slammed the outside door on Gigi and ran through the garden, more quickly now that she knew the way.

As she climbed the flight of stairs to the theater

office it suddenly occurred to her that there might be another, more formidable obstacle. What if Babcock had returned?

She touched her bosom. The certificate was well hidden. But he might try to force it from her. She stood hesitant on the top step.

There was a sound from inside, and the door slowly creaked open as she stood there, frozen with fear.

It was Ben.

She threw herself into his arms, but he held her off.

"Where is it? Did you get it?"

She nodded.

"Hurry, give it to me! The place is swarming with Babcock's men. They've blocked the stage-door entrance, and they're out front."

"Ben, what will we do?"

"Give it to me, Julie, please!"

She pulled out the folded paper from the front of her dress and put it in his hand.

"But . . ."

"I don't think they'll bother me. At least I've got a good chance of getting this to the *Bugle*. It's you that Babcock's after."

"But what will I do?"

"You'll hide, Julie. Till I get back."

"Hide!" She gasped. "Where?"

"The stage. The back row of the chorus."

His idea flabbergasted her. "But Ben, I can't sing or dance!"

"You won't have to. Not really. Just stay at the back and try to move about the way the others do. The show's got at least an hour to run, and there'll be the curtain calls. I'll be back as fast as I can."

"Ben, I can't!"

"You've got to. Come on."

Again they crossed the green room. Behind the curtain of Rose's dressing room Ben pulled back another curtain in front of a closet where costumes were hanging. He took one and then another, spreading them out and examining and looking at Julie and shaking his head, until he found what he wanted.

"I don't know whose this was, but it's the only one small enough for you. I'll turn my back, and you . . . you hurry."

It was an old-fashioned dress with a full white skirt, embroidered all over with butterflies of different colors. There was a sash of spangly stuff and another band that she presumed was for the hair.

In a moment she had slipped out of Rose's black satin and hung it in the closet, slipped into the full-skirted costume, and found two pins to help the waistline fit. Next she jerked the hairpins from her hair, grabbed a brush from the dressing

table, then put the band over the top of her head, letting her hair flow free, in as close an approximation as she could of the style the old fashioned dress seemed to call for. In the mirror she did look like an illustration out of an old, old pattern book.

"Hurry," Ben said without turning.

"I'm ready." She whirled around and faced him nervously. "Ben, would you keep my little purse in your pocket? I can't carry it onstage. Oh, Ben, I don't know if I can even go onstage."

"Of course you can."

"Do I look all right?"

"Fine, fine!" He smiled appreciatively.

"Oh, I don't mean that. I mean, will I look all right out there?"

"Better daub some of that stuff on your face."

"Oh, dear." But she tried.

He took the little purse. "You're hardly recognizable with the warpaint. That's good. But don't let any stagedoor Johnnies get near you."

"I shan't!"

He held open the curtain to the green room and said with his funny smile, "I can't even kiss you goodbye. But wait until you've washed your face!"

Then he took her hand and led her into the wings.

A stagehand gave them a curious look. Ben winked at him and reached into his pocket.

"Give this little lady a chance, would you? Just a chance to get onstage?"

The man looked at the five-dollar gold piece.

"Ben!" Julie whispered in protest.

The coin disappeared into the stagehand's paw. He stepped back to let her pass, and Ben gave her a little shove.

Never before had Julie found herself swallowed up in such a crowd. Men and women leaping and twirling, then joining hands to skip back and forth. At first she stumbled about almost overcome by the lights, the noise, the odor of greasepaint and crowded humanity. She worked her way as quickly as she could toward the rear, where she found a row of girls who were not doing much more than posturing and swaying, and did her best to imitate them. A couple of them looked at her puzzledly, and another said, "Out of my way, bumpkin," but in the general melee she was scarcely noticed. What would happen when the show ended and they all paraded up front for the curtain call? Would she be able to follow and not trip and not be noticed by anyone?

As they were forming into rows, like an army ready to march, and everyone was bellowing "Riding Down Broadway," Julie first noticed another odor, familiar but out of place. Was it from the rim of gaslight that circled the front of the stage? But she would have noticed that from the beginning.

It was the odor of smoke. Wasn't anybody else aware of it?

She looked from one face to another, but they were all intent on singing. Now the individuals in each row linked arms and moved to the left and then to the right, in rhythm.

She never would forget that odor, the smell of her nightmare. There was a fire somewhere, she was sure, and here she was in the center of the row, both arms tightly locked, trying her best to keep step.

The audience went on cheering and clapping as the music blared in a crescendo. And then, in that brief period when the music of the finale faded away and the audience was temporarily silent, in that one flickering vacuum, other girls in the back row began looking at each other and wrinkling their noses. And plainly from the wings there came a new sound of crackling.

The girls on either side of Julie unlinked their arms and screamed. A yellow flame was licking up the side of the scenery.

Chapter
ELEVEN

"FIRE! FIRE!" The word passed along the line and from one line to the next, toward the front of the stage. But the orchestra played more loudly, and the show did not stop. The back line broke, and the girls ran in both directions. The stagehands were carrying buckets and futilely tossing water at the burning papier mâché and thin wood. Someone opened a door, and the wind rushed in, pushing smoke ahead of it.

The music had changed. They were playing "Marching through Georgia," and someone—probably the director—shouted, "Attention! On your feet!" in an attempt to control the cast and the audience.

The gray blanket of smoke rolled across the

back of the stage. People ran in all directions screaming, "Fire! Fire! Run for your lives!" Julie was pulled this way and that. Instinctively she moved forward, away from the smoke and the hungry crack-crack sound of the flames. The leading performers were still marching up and down, next to the footlights, but beyond them the audience was heading for the front doors. They were no longer a group of well dressed people clapping and laughing at the make-believe. They were a blind, frightened mass, climbing over seats and jumping from the balcony and pushing ahead like dumb animals.

Now there was an opening in the wings on the opposite side from where Julie had first seen the fire, and she abandoned the pretense of being a performer and ran for it.

The green room, too, was filled with smoke. The door to the little balcony stood open. People could have run there and jumped, but the balcony itself now was an enormous torch. The stagedoor entrance was blocked with pushing people.

She forgot her fear of Babcock and his men. Her only impulse was to get out.

Strangely enough, despite the others in that room, she felt quite alone. Then she looked up and saw the door to the office. No one was going up those stairs. People did not realize that it was a way of escape.

She ran up the steps, and at the top she leaned

over and called back to the people pushing their way toward the stage entrance, "Come on! This way!"

They paid no attention.

The door was locked. Desperate now, she pounded on it with her fists. "Help! Help! Please open the door! Please!"

She leaned against the door, sobbing, in complete panic. She heard the key turn in the lock, the door opened, and she stumbled inside.

The door blew shut. Her eyes were stinging from the smoke. She rubbed them and saw Vaughn Babcock staggering toward her.

"Wha' is 't, my dear?"

"The theater's on fire! Hurry!"

He stared at her dazedly, as if he had not heard what she said. She looked to the desk. The bottle was almost empty.

"Fire!" she repeated. "Hurry!"

He took another step toward her.

"Ginny! Oh, my Ginny!"

He was drunk. And she had forgotten her old-fashioned costume and her hair hanging over her shoulders. The way Mama probably had worn hers.

"No!" she cried. "No, I'm not Ginny. Hurry. Please hurry!"

He moved toward her more swiftly than she had anticipated and put his arms around her with a terrifying strength, but her terror gave her the

strength to break away and to run to the door to the passage.

It was locked.

Babcock followed her. With the surprising speed of the intoxicated he reached below the knob and knocked the key to the floor. She bent to reach it, and he seized her by the shoulders and jerked her upright, whirling her around and pulling her close to his chest.

She freed an arm and swung wildly, flicking his ear.

His hands slipped to her waist, and he boosted her off the floor and into the air.

"Ginny, Ginny, sweet kitten, always like to fight!"

"Put me down!"

He paid no attention. He went on swinging her around in dizzying circles. It was useless to fight someone so much larger, so much stronger, so crazed. *If I want to get out of here alive,* she thought, *I'll have to let him think I am "his" Ginny.*

She attempted a smile.

At last he stopped whirling her about. Slowly he lowered her until her feet touched the floor, but he still held her tightly.

"Vaughn," she said with mock gentleness, "Vaughn, dear, let's go home."

Perhaps her voice or her expression were not

at all like that of his long-lost Ginny. He appeared confused. In the momentary quiet the roar of the fire beyond the door was loud, the odor of smoke stronger. She turned her head and saw the gray fog of curls slipping into the office, like a wicked jinn appearing from inside a bottle.

"Look, Vaughn!" She pointed beyond his arm.

With the same dazed expression, he turned his head. "Oh, my God!"

"Hurry, Vaughn." Still gently.

He let go of her waist, put one arm protectively across her shoulders, and swung her around toward the door to the passage. With his free hand he seized the knob.

"What the devil!" He fumbled for the key.

"It fell."

He let go of her completely, and together they dropped to the floor and searched, as the incoming tide of smoke crept across the carpet.

She was the one who found it, just under the mahogany desk, and she scrambled to her feet crying, "Here it is!" He stood up, rubbing his eyes and coughing.

She ran to the door before he could get the key away from her, unlocked it, and ran down the stairs.

I don't have to pretend any longer, she thought. *I'm free!*

She had forgotten the second, heavier door.

While she fought to open it she could hear him behind her, his cry echoing through the dark. "Ginny! Where are you, Ginny!"

He was on the stairs when she finally got the door open.

More frightened now of Babcock than of the fire, she slammed the door shut behind her.

She caught her breath in the blissful air of the little garden.

It was bright as day. The flames had reached the roof of the theater.

How easy it would be for the fire to spread to the house, along the connecting passage, if they did not get it under control soon! How could it be stopped, in such a wind?

She turned toward the house, and at that moment Babcock opened the door behind her. She ran across the flagstoned path. Her full skirt billowed in the wind and caught on one of the flowerpots, and in the moment she bent to untangle it, Babcock caught up with her and again wrapped his arms around her.

Once more, life itself was more important than her hatred for this man. She gritted her teeth and let him hold her close.

"Ginny, my love." He suddenly bent down and closed his mouth over hers.

She pulled away in revulsion, glad that the fire-lit yard was not bright enough for him to see the expression on her face. She thought quickly.

"Vaughn, let's go inside, please. I'll get the little blue box for you."

He was running his large hand down across her flowing hair.

"The little blue box," he repeated. "Remember the day I gave it to you?" And then he took his hand from her head. She could make out the frown of confusion between his close-set eyes. Then he grabbed her shoulders in a cruel grip, and she knew that she no longer was Ginny.

"I'll get it for you," she told him again, with an attempt at bravado. "Come on, hurry, before the fire spreads."

He was sobering now, which was all the more frightening.

"The box," he said. "Yes, the box."

He dragged her along the flagstone path, tumbling flowerpots as they went. He pushed open the door and brought her into Malvina's room.

Malvina herself was standing by the window that looked out to the garden.

Never before had Julie encountered such hatred in another's face. Of course, Malvina had seen the embrace. Now, more than ever, Malvina would believe that he had never been married to Mama. To Malvina Julie was just another young girl, another rival for his attention.

The woman stood silent, the only movement the rising and falling of her huge bosom and the trembling of the black feathers on her black satin

peignoir. She turned her face toward Babcock, her expression unchanged. He let go of Julie's arm.

Julie was furious at the implication in the woman's glance. But there was no time for anger or defense with words. She must get out of this house, before he discovered that the box was empty.

Malvina's eyes were on her again, traveling from the flowing hair and ribbon down past the paint on her face, to the elaborate, old-fashioned costume.

"You've been lying all along, haven't you, Miss Julie Jameson? Playing the innocent with all your stories. You're another slut like your friend Rose Cassidy and the rest of them. Get your things and get out of my house."

"Just a minute, Miss Wintz."

"Shut your face and go!" Malvina raised her arm threateningly.

Vaughn Babcock found his voice. "No, Malvina, wait!"

"You keep out of this."

"Mallie, it's important. The little blue box."

"What are you babbling about?"

"I've got to find it, Mallie. Or I'm in trouble."

"You're drunk."

"No, Mallie, I'm not drunk."

"All right then. Tell me. What about this blue box?"

He looked at Julie. The suave veneer was com-

pletely rubbed away. Julie thought, *Even if I give him the box, it won't be finished. He knows I'll talk. He knows it will be printed in the paper. He sent those men to beat his own son. What will he do to me?*

"Get the box, Julie!" It was a command. "Get it now." He lowered his eyes. "You don't need to know what's in it, Mallie. Just trust me."

"Trust you!"

He was afraid of Malvina. He had lied to her, and he was terrified of her learning the truth. Julie forgot completely the implications for herself, the greater danger into which she was plunging. She would not let him boss her around, just to protect himself from his woman.

"I'll tell you why the box is important, Miss Wintz!" She stood up straight and put her hand to her throat. "You see this key? It's for that box. The box where my mother hid their wedding certificate."

Malvina's face went white with fury. In the silent moment as she turned toward Babcock, Julie could hear the noise of the fire, the howl of the wind, and from some dark corner of the gaudy room a mournful whimper from little Gigi.

"You see, Mallie, how important it is." His voice was scarcely above a whisper.

"I see," Malvina said at last. "Sure, I see."

Strange the way she was looking at him, with a mixture of anger and resentment but not a shred

of disavowal. He had lied to her before. He had hurt her before. Perhaps never as deeply as this, but this was not the first time. She would not turn on him now. She never would turn on him. In some way they were forever linked. They were a team. They hated each other, but they loved each other. Julie remembered the sounds she had heard in the night. *He beats her, and she loves him. She would do anything for him. I've got to get out of here, away from both of them. I want nothing more to do with them.*

"I'll get the box," she told them. "And my things."

Malvina whirled around. "Get the box!" she cried. "But never mind your things. You're not leaving this house."

Julie walked past her to the door, opened it, slammed it behind her.

The chandelier glowed in the hall near the front door. That was all that mattered. She ran for it.

The door was locked. There was a key, and above it an enormous bolt she scarcely could reach. She stood tiptoe. Her trembling fingers were of little use against the heavy bolt.

"Oh, no you don't!"

Babcock was running down the hall after her. She had just managed the bolt when he reached her, seized her arm, and pulled her away.

"Let me go!" Julie cried. "Let me go! The box is empty. I lied. The box is empty!"

He dragged her to the stairway and pushed her onto it with such force that she sprawled on the steps. He grabbed her hair and pulled her to her feet and pushed her on, as if he were unaware of her sobbing protest.

No one responded to her cries. The house must be deserted except for the three of them. And Gigi, now barking wildly. If only Gigi were a mastiff and not that helpless little bunch of fur.

They reached her room, and he shoved her inside. She turned around and beat on his chest. He pushed her away and swung his hand across her face again and again, until she was forced backward and fell across the bed.

"The box!" he was yelling. "The box! Or I'll break every bone in your body!"

The room was light as day from the flames of the theater. He leaned over her, his long body a black silhouette against the crimson.

There was no escape. Even if she could get past him to the door and down the stairs, there was Malvina. All she could hope to do was to give him the box and try to get away before he could open it.

She was breathing so hard that it was difficult to speak, and her face was stinging from his blows. She gasped, "If you want . . . your box . . . you'll have to . . . let me get it."

"Where is it? I'll get it myself!"

"You can't!" she cried. "The place is too small."

"The place? What place?"

"A little room, behind the armoire." She tried to point, but the arm he had held so tightly was painful to lift from the bed.

"Behind the armoire," he repeated. Then, quickly, "Of course. Of course. Uncle Wilbur. The underground. It's been boarded up for years."

He pulled her to a sitting position. "Get it. Now."

Slowly she moved to the edge of the bed and let her feet dangle on the side. She was limp and thoroughly afraid, and she realized the risk she was taking in crawling into that secret place. He could close the armoire door on her and leave her there to burn. For surely, surely the house would be afire any moment. But what alternative was there, except to let him go on beating her?

It was her only chance. To hand him the box and run for it. True, Malvina was below, but Malvina was a woman. And perhaps, after all the noise, the maid would miraculously appear. Lizzie, taciturn as she was, was another human being, another possibility. And there was Gigi. And least Gigi could get in the way, and that might help.

"Hurry, girl!"

Weak as she was, she straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin and gave him a look of sheer disgust. Then, still slowly, she let herself

down over the side of the bed and walked to the armoire, feeling his eyes on her back. She turned to give him a defiant glance, then pushed the clothes to either side.

In the dark of the secret room the noise of the wind and the fire was shut off, but from below she could hear undistinguishable sounds and a rumbling that must be Gigi growling.

It took her as long as before to locate the small box. From her room Babcock called, "What's the matter? What are you doing in there? Why can't you hurry?"

I must hurry, of course, she reminded herself. *Not because he says so but because I must get out of here, before the fire spreads.* Yet just being alone was such a relief. To be away from Babcock and the terror of his touch brought back good sense and the courage of desperation. *You're right, Julie Jameson, and he is wrong, and you've got to get out of this house! Here he can hurt you. Outside you can hurt him, repay him for what he has done to you, and to Jared, and to so many others.*

Oh, Ben, if only you could have come with me!

The costume was a nuisance. Already it was ruined, like the dress she'd borrowed from Rose. What a silly thought to cross her mind when her very life was in danger!

She took a deep breath, picked up the box, and crawled through the armoire.

Babcock snatched the box from her hands and moved back a step. He held it as if it were some sort of talisman that had mesmerized him.

Now was the moment to run, but the transformation of the brute who had attacked her into what she saw now was so startling that she hesitated, staring. His hands were trembling, tears were spilling out of his eyes.

He lifted his face. "Ginny, my darling." The fantasy had caught him again. He moved the box to his left hand and came toward her, his right arm extended.

"Don't you touch her!"

They both turned. Malvina was in the doorway. Gigi peeked out from under the trailing peignoir and whimpered.

"Mallie!" It was a cry that was sheer fright. And as Malvina moved into the room toward them, Julie followed Babcock's gaze and saw what he already had seen. The tiny gun in Malvina's hands.

Now Julie dared not run for it. She backed up, her hands clenched and damp. Her heart seemed to swell in her chest.

Was the gun for her or for Babcock, or for both of them?

Malvina was looking directly at Babcock.

I could hide behind the armoire, thought Julie. *Malvina doesn't know about the secret place.* She edged a little farther back.

"Mallie, for God's sake!" His eyes were on the gun.

"The window, Vaughn."

"Mallie!"

"You heard me. The window."

The box fell from his trembling hand.

"Three stories higher," Malvina went on. "But the same window. Remember?"

His jaw fell open. He stared. He swallowed. "Mallie, for the sake of heaven . . ." The words were hoarse.

Malvina's smile was a dreadful grimace. Her gold tooth shone in the firelit room. "The same window, Vaughn, from which your poor Uncle Wilbur . . ." She paused. ". . . jumped."

The suicide. Julie remembered Wilma's friend Miss Tinsley saying, "I never believed Wilbur Babcock committed suicide." What did Malvina know about it? Vaughn himself had said that he and his uncle had frequently quarreled. Miss Wintz, too, had spoken of a quarrel.

Three stories higher, but the same window.

"Mallie," he was pleading, "you promised. You swore."

Gigi whimpered. Malvina gave her a kick, and the dog scurried from under the peignoir and crossed the room toward Julie. Julie bent down and picked her up and held her close.

Malvina moved closer, the gun still pointed at

Babcock, and he edged away, toward the window.

"I swore to keep your secret. I know." Malvina's voice was clear and cold. "Because you paid me to keep it."

"Mallie, dear—"

"I had to keep your secret. And I've hated it, all these years. Your Uncle Wilbur was a good man. He was good to me. He picked me out of the gutter and gave me my first start. I respected him. I respected him more than any man I've known in all my rotten life. And you killed him. I saw you kill him. I watched you drive him to the window. You're as much a murderer as if you had used a gun. Very clever. But I'm just as clever."

She gave a flicker of a glance toward Julie.

"You had a witness to bribe. I shan't."

Julie shivered and clung to Gigi.

Babcock lifted his head, almost bravely. "Why, Mallie? Why now, after all these years?"

"You thought I loved you, didn't you? I was sorry for you in the beginning. That's why I didn't turn you over to the police. Besides, what good would that have done me? Where would I have been? Back in the gutter. It was much, much easier to keep your secret. To pretend I loved you. To keep your ugly secret was a small price to pay for all the power it gave me."

He hung his head again. "I've loved you, Mal-

lie," he said helplessly. "I've always thought you loved me."

"You're lying, Vaughn. You've lied to me all along. You loved that woman. You married her. And now it's her daughter."

"No!"

"It's over, Vaughn. I have this house. I know your will. You've taken care of me very well. But it's over."

With horror Julie watched Malvina move closer and closer to the frightened man. She dared not cry out. She dared not move. The shiny revolver brightened as Malvina moved forward, half circling, toward the illuminated area of the window. Now Malvina's back was to Julie, the large figure blotting out the man. He was moving toward the window, no longer protesting.

Gigi trembled, every bone in the small body shaking.

It could not be happening. It would have to stop. Malvina would drop the gun, or Babcock would take it away from her, or something, something would happen to prevent a murder from taking place in front of her. She closed her eyes.

There was a great clash of breaking glass and a scream echoing downward.

Julie opened her eyes.

Malvina Wintz was silhouetted against the window. The revolver still gleamed.

"You had a witness to bribe," Malvina had said. "I shan't."

Still holding Gigi, Julie moved back, and back, her eyes never leaving the silent silhouette, to the armoire. She turned quickly and crawled inside, pulled the clothes in place behind her, then went on through the back, put the dog down, and pulled the cloth in place.

Don't let the fire come, she prayed. *Don't let it come until Malvina has gone.*

For an agonizingly long time there was no sound from the other room. Then an incoherent mumble—no doubt Malvina had noticed Julie's disappearance—and the sound of the door to the hall opening and closing.

There in the secret place, holding the little dog in her arms, Julie was much less aware of the fire. Momentarily she had a false sense of safety—safety from that gun and that ruthless woman.

Gigi wriggled from Julie's arms and began sniffing around the floor. The clicking of her toenails was abnormally loud. If Malvina had gone back to her room, would she hear?

Three stories. She was three stories up. How could a small sound carry through the thick old floors?

Sounds did not carry as well to the bedroom as to this place. Vaughn Babcock had mentioned his uncle's name and the underground. There must

have been a passage once, directly out of this sealed-off place.

Her speculations were shattered by a scream from below. Lizzie's rough voice shot up at her through the floor.

"Miss Wintz! Miss Wintz, where are you? Fire!"

Gigi snuffled at the cloth hanging over the entrance, whimpering for escape. A moment later there was a rustling, and Julie knew the dog had found her way out.

Julie pushed back the green baize and followed. Beyond the armoire was a wall of smoke. Gigi bounded back toward her, barking wildly.

Malvina had closed the bedroom door when she left. This was the back of the house, where the fire had caught first. There would be no escape down the stairs, even if she could find her way to the bedroom door.

Followed by Gigi, she crawled back through the armoire. The smoke had not penetrated to the secret place. Here she could at least breathe. But for how long?

She couldn't die this way, she couldn't! There must be some way out, there must be someone who could help her. Better Malvina and the gun than to die like this.

She lay flat on the floor and beat it with her fists.

"Help! Help! Help!"

How long did she pound and scream, while Gigi circled her, yelping like a banshee? It seemed a lifetime. The smoke was creeping through the armoire, and she was exhausted, too hoarse to scream any longer. Sobs racked her body. She closed her eyes, and the tears burned from under her eyelids and ran down her face.

From far below she heard it, above the crackle of the fire. Ben's voice.

"Julie, where are you?"

Thank the lord she had told him of the secret place. She was too exhausted to have given an explanation in the middle of this nightmare.

"Look for it, Julie!" he was telling her. "A spot on the floor to break through. Julie, you've got to look!"

She began crawling over the dusty, scratchy, uneven floor, feeling with her fingers outspread. She was inside a box. There was no way out. And if there was a way, there were no stairs, and she was three stories up. Three stories. People who jumped three stories—or sometimes even one story—were killed. Wilbur Babcock. Vaughn Babcock. Julie Jameson.

"Look, Julie, look! You've got to find it!"

Gigi was beside her. She could hear those little paws scratching.

What was that? Just an old nail; the head had scratched the palm of her hand. The blood was hot and slippery.

A nail coming loose. She pulled at it, and it came away. The board was rotten.

She dug at it, pulled at it. Something jogged her elbow, and she realized that Gigi was digging too. It was impossible, it couldn't be done, but she was doing it. A piece of that board pulled off, a light shone up from below. So far below!

She pulled at the board next to it, stomped on it. Now, for the first time, she could see the spot where she was working. The whole area was getting lighter. She looked over her shoulder. The cloth that hung over the back of the armoire was a waving curtain of flame.

One more piece of board. Another. The small hole grew, so slowly. Was there room to squeeze through?

She lay flat on the floor and put her face to the hole, drew up a breath of air, blinked open her stinging eyelids as wide as possible. Now she could see Ben, far below. Even if she could make the hole wide enough, she could never jump so far.

"Julie! Come on, Julie!"

"I can't, Ben. I can't!"

"Julie, look, you don't have to jump. Some of the stairs are gone, but it's like a slide. Just let yourself go."

She saw now what he meant. If only she could get through . . .

"Keep trying, Julie. Look, I've pulled a mattress in here."

Gigi's furry face was next to hers. Julie lifted her face from the hole, then reached for the dog. "You first, baby," she whispered into a quivering ear. "It's big enough for you."

She watched the dog tumbling through the passageway, down and down, saw her sprawled on the bed, shaking herself.

Julie tried sitting on the edge of the hole, with all her weight.

The fire was creeping across the floor now. She dragged her full skirt away from the flames, pushed it down into the opening. The boards creaked, sagged . . . and finally gave way.

She was plunging down, down, down. . . .

That was the last she remembered.

Chapter
TWELVE

SHE GRADUALLY awoke to a warm, homey smell of safety. She was aware of the feeling before she opened her eyes. A warm, soft bed. Was she somehow, miraculously, back home in Port Sumas? There was the murmur of voices and a gentle background noise of footsteps, which had been part of her waking when she lived with the Hendersons above the general store.

A peculiar sound lifted her eyelids. A mountain of a feather-filled quilt, green embroidery on green silk, puffed over her. Beyond was a cuckoo clock on a wall covered with a dark-patterned paper. She watched the mechanical bird bound in and out. Now she could smell the sauerkraut and sausage and beer.

She turned her face slightly to the right. Ben Van Kirk was sitting beside her. She couldn't seem to speak, not even to say his name. She swallowed and felt the tears roll down her cheeks.

"It's all right, Julie. Don't try to talk." He was wiping her cheeks with his handkerchief. "You're safe now. That's all that matters."

At last she managed, "But where am I?"

"The Schmidts' place. Above the Hofbrau. How do you feel? Terrible? Do you hurt?"

She shook her head. "Not really. Just tired."

"Sure. You've been through a lot. Did Babcock hurt you?"

She nodded, then shuddered and closed her eyes.

"Don't try to talk about it yet."

Her eyes flew open. "Ben, how did you find me?"

"There was no way to get back into the theater. For a while I watched the few who managed to escape. Then I remembered the passageway. I got to the house when the firemen did. Of course, they were just dashing through the downstairs to the back, where the fire was. I went straight to Malvina's room, where we knew the passage from the theater would end. I searched it and her dressing room beyond. It was there I heard your cry for help."

"Thank God! Oh, Ben, if you hadn't come . . . if you . . ."

He flushed. "You've no business being grateful to me. I got you into all this. You took a lot of unnecessary risks tonight, all because of me."

"Unnecessary?"

"The exposé is off." He hesitated. "Babcock's dead."

She closed her eyes in swift painful remembrance of the crash and the echoing. "Yes," she whispered.

"The firemen found his body in the garden." He held her hand more tightly. "Don't try to talk about it yet, Julie. Just lie back and feel safe."

All that had happened to her, her private nightmare, was being linked with the rest of the outside world.

"The theater burned . . . and some people didn't get out?" she asked.

"I'm afraid so."

She was thinking back now to the theater, to the stage and the music and the green room.

"Rose? What about Rose?" She lifted her head from the pillow.

"Rose is all right. Somehow she made it." He shook his head. "So many of those kids in the front line kept dancing and singing, trying to keep the audience from panicking—until it was too late. Rose was one of the lucky ones."

"I ruined her costume. And that lovely dress. I hate to tell her. But I'm so glad she's all right."

"She knows about the costume." Ben smiled in

amusement. "She got you out of what was left of it. And washed your face. Would you like to see her?"

"Where is she?"

"In the living room, with the others." He nodded toward the door.

There were trails of dust on Rose's fluffy white costume. She had washed the paint from her face, and the freckles were naked on her shiny nose.

She grinned at Julie. "Ben tells me you're fussin' about that old costume. It wasn't even mine, just got left in the closet. Anyhow, who's worryin' about clothes? The whole blasted theater's gone and most of old number three. Leastways, our rooms got it. So it's new clothes. I always did like new clothes."

Then I haven't any clothes at all, Julie thought. *And no money.*

"Quite a night, ain't it?" Rose said cheerfully. "What with old Babcock doin' himself in."

"Oh, but Rose"—Julie raised herself on her elbow; she must explain—"you don't—"

"Don't fret," Rose interrupted her. "I'm not sheddin' no tears over that one. He gave me a start, sure, but I couldn'ta kept it up much longer. Not with Malvina watching. Like I said, I got a start. Now if Ben here writes me a rip-snorting review . . ." She winked.

"I must confess, Rose," Ben admitted, "the fate

of the 'Glib Girls of Gotham' has not crossed my mind this evening."

"Never mind. I was teasin'. The fire's news. And us fools prancin' around up there in the burning scenery. I'll make out."

Julie was only half-listening. Malvina Wintz. Nobody had mentioned her. Malvina had had time to get out of the house. She was somewhere, and she still had that gun. *I'm the only one*, thought Julie, *who knows Babcock did not really commit suicide.*

"I hear you was in the chorus tonight," Rose was saying. "Howdja like it? I was too busy up front to notice you, but Ben says you looked pretty."

Julie nodded absently. "Rose! Ben! There's something I've got to tell you."

But before she could go on, someone called out from the next room, "Is she awake?"

"Feel up to seeing others now?" Ben asked.

"Who?"

"Your brother and your uncle," Rose explained. "I've been talkin' to the both of them. Fact is, I've been learnin' a lot of your family history."

So Uncle Kiley had come. He was her uncle, but she was reluctant to see him now. She didn't like to remember all the things he had said about poor Mama. She didn't like to have help from a man like Kiley Mahone. A few hours before,

when Vaughn Babcock was alive and she and Jared were in danger, it had been different.

"I'm afraid half of New York is going to know Julie's family history tomorrow morning," Ben added. "The *Bugle* went to press with the first part of the exposé before I knew about Babcock. The exposé is meaningless, now that he's dead."

"Julie, you're awake!" Jared was in the doorway, Uncle Kiley peering around his shoulder. "You all right, Julie?"

"I'm all right."

Jared loped across the room, came between Ben and Rose, bent over, and grabbed both her hands. "Why did you go back into that house, Julie? Why did you go back where *he* was?"

Her big brother, admonishing her.

"The theater was on fire, Jared. The only way I knew out was through that office."

"He was there when you went in?"

She nodded. She looked around at the four faces. She must summon the strength to tell them everything now. She could wait no longer.

"He was there, and he was drunk. He thought I was my mother. For a little while I had to pretend I was, to keep him from hurting me. He thought the wedding certificate was still in the little blue box. He wanted it."

"And like a fool you went after it," Jared said disapprovingly.

"He forced me to!" Angry now, she added, "Jared, you're hurting my hands!"

"Come on, Jared, leave her alone!" Uncle Kiley pushed him aside.

"You're all right now, little girl," he boomed down at her. "So forget it. We can all forget Babcock and his whole filthy gang. Look, I want to shake your hand. And apologize. You're a plucky kid."

Confused, she looked up at him as his fat fingers swallowed up her hand.

"You and Jared are coming home with me. Whatever Mabel says."

His red face had grown even redder but now the blue eyes seemed hard, not with cruelty, but with purpose. He was a rough and awkward man and he could be frightening, but now Julie could glimpse, underneath, an inarticulate decency, striving for the surface.

"We wouldn't want to impose," she said politely.

"Don't get me wrong," he went on. "It's just the Gardens Mabel don't like. Even though it's been our bread and butter. What with paying off Babcock and other guys for protection, well, I've done a lot of things I'm not too proud of. But now everything's changed. I'm going to make up for everything. I've got plans."

He let go of her hand and threw his arm around

Jared's shoulders. "I'm getting into politics myself. I'm going to start a new ticket. A reform ticket. It'll take time, of course. Not this year. Maybe not for several years. But I've got just the fellow I'm going to groom."

He hesitated, and everyone stared at him.

"Meet the candidate of the future—Jared Babcock."

Jared's mouth fell open, and nobody spoke as the implication of Kiley Mahone's words, the meaning of his plan, became evident. When the newspapers appeared tomorrow morning all of New York City would know that Jared was a legitimate son, disowned by his own father. The scandal would go on being news; Kiley Mahone would keep it alive. It was a scheme that would create a career for Jared and change the reputation and finances of Kiley Mahone. And as he had said, Kiley Mahone was going to make up for everything. He was going to repay the Babcocks for what they had done to him and to his sister.

Ben was the first to speak. "Well, well," he said under his breath.

Jared drew away from his uncle's arm and stood straight, taller than ever. "I'm not Jared Babcock," he said. "I'm Jared Jameson, and I'm going to go on being Jared Jameson."

He looked down at Julie, his long face very white in the gaslight. "Even when I found out he

was my father, I wanted to kill him. For what he did to our mother and to you, Julie. I think I would have if he hadn't killed himself first."

Embarrassment filled the room like a cloud.

Julie at last had found a moment to speak. "He didn't commit suicide," she said. "Not really. No more than his uncle did."

They all turned from Jared to her.

"What do you mean, Julie?" Ben asked.

"I was there." She sat up for the first time, pulling the feather quilt up to her chin. "I saw it."

She wasn't alone any more, and the relief gave her back her strength. She was not alone—here were four friends. She no longer was running and running from danger. She poured out her story breathlessly, and at the end she turned directly to Ben.

"That was why I was in that secret room. I was hiding from Miss Wintz. Maybe it was foolish, but right then I was more afraid of her and that gun than I was of the fire."

"Of course!" said Ben.

"Where do you suppose she is now?" Rose wondered aloud.

"We've got to find her. Before she finds Julie," Ben announced.

"She's probably flown the coop," said Kiley Mahone. "She could be anywhere by this time."

"Why would she leave the house?" Rose countered. "She could still be looking for Julie!"

"We'll try there first," Ben decided. "After I've found a policeman."

"I'll come with you!" said Jared.

"Me, too!" said Kiley Mahone.

"Well, I'm not going to be left out this time!" Rose cried.

"Wait, everybody!" Julie pleaded, as the group turned toward the door. "Wait for me! I'm not staying here alone."

Rose giggled. "Julie, you can't go outside in your shift. I'm sorry, but the dress was in rags. You tore it to pieces in that crazy tumble."

"Don't leave me!" Julie begged. "Find me something, Rose. Ask Mrs. Schmidt."

"Are you sure you're strong enough?" Jared asked.

"I'm all right, I tell you. I'm not going to be left behind."

Nobody tried to argue with her vehemence. A moment later Rose came back with a cape.

As they came down the stairs into the restaurant, they heard the sirens. Mr. Schmidt ran out ahead of them. All up and down the block people were looking toward Broadway.

"Not another fire tonight!" Rose exclaimed.

They moved down the block, Rose and Kiley Mahone in front, Jared and Ben on either side of Julie, each holding an arm.

As they crossed Broadway they saw people running toward Opal Street.

The air was heavy with the smell of smoke. The hull of the Theatre Marceau was still smoldering. But against the sky beyond, there was fresh sunset orange. The fire department's red chariots, steaming like teakettles, passed with a roar, foam-flecked horses and a splash of red and gold, followed by the panting spotted dogs.

Number three Opal Street was on fire again. This time the flames were licking at the little cat-ear dormers.

They stopped across the street, where other people were gathering.

A fireman with an ax broke down the heavy front door and dashed inside as a wall of smoke rolled out. A moment later he reappeared, shaking his head and shouting to the other firemen.

"It must be empty," said Kiley Mahone. "Everybody must have gotten out. Well, there's no point in standing here, unless you all are fond of fires."

Nobody moved.

Inside the borrowed cape Julie shivered. Number three Opal had been a place of loneliness and terror; yet it was painful to watch its destruction. It had been a lovely house once, the house of her dreams that Mama had described so glowingly, a symbol of happiness and beauty.

She looked up at her brother's face, illumined by the flames. The disillusionment had been even more cruel, for him. She wished she could think of something, anything, to say that would comfort him.

Uncle Kiley, who obviously wanted to leave, was studying her face and Jared's. She could see the older man's lips twitching as he searched for words.

Suddenly he touched Jared on the shoulder. "My boy . . ."

Jared's look was respectful, but his eyes had not lost their hurt. "Yes, sir?"

"I meant what I said. And I'd be just as willing to groom Jared Jameson." He put out his hand.

Jared straightened. He blinked his round eyes and swallowed, and then he took his uncle's hands.

"Thank you, sir. I don't know what to say. Except that I'll do the best I can. I can't promise anything. But I'll work hard."

Julie turned away from them, leaving them to their man-to-man talk. She clung more closely to Ben's arm. Why were they standing here? If Miss Wintz were not in the house, they should be looking for her elsewhere.

Then Ben cried, "Hey, what's that?" and pointed.

There was movement on the front step of the

house. Something more than smoke. Someone crawling out the door?

Julie took a step forward. "It's Gigi! I forgot about Gigi. Oh, the poor dog." She let go of Ben and started across the street.

"Julie, wait!"

She ran faster, ignoring his cries, pushing her way so quickly past the first fireman that he did not have a chance to grab her.

Gigi saw her, from the top of the stoop, and came tumbling toward her. Julie bent and picked her up and held her close, petting her silky ears. "Oh, poor doggie! Poor doggie! It's all right!"

"Get back, Miss! Get back!"

But before she turned to run back across the street, she looked up once more at the house, at the front door, and the window to the right with the ROOMS TO LET sign.

Malvina Wintz was sitting in her usual place.

There was a strange expression on her face. Tears were rolling down her cheeks. Her eyes were wild, anguished, defiant.

"Look!" Julie screamed. "Look! There she is!"

As Julie lifted her arm and pointed toward the window, Malvina Wintz put the little silver pistol to her own temple.

A timber, showering sparks, crashed on the sidewalk, muffling the sound of the shot. Ben had Julie's arm and was pulling her back across the street to safety.

Long after Rose and Jared and Uncle Kiley had gone back to the Hotbrau, Julie could not move, and Ben stayed beside her, holding her close. It seemed important that she watch to the last. A dream of happiness turned to a nightmare had to be destroyed, completely, irrevocably.

"It's just a house, Julie, and an old one at that." Ben's voice was soft.

"My mother loved it so. And I hated it."

"Only one good thing about it." He put his finger under her chin and tipped her face upward. "It's where I found you."

Her heart began pounding.

"Julie, could you put that dog down for just a moment?"

She put Gigi down on the cobblestones, and the dog huddled against her ankles.

Ben actually looked bashful. He took his pipe out and held it, unlit. With his other hand he smoothed at his mustache with a nervous gesture.

"The new houses they're putting up are much better constructed. The kind we would have."

"What?" she gasped.

"It's my clumsy way of proposing," he said dryly.

"But Rose said . . ."

"What has Rose got to do with it?"

She had never felt so shy. "That you never could afford . . ."

"A wife?"

She nodded.

He threw back his head and laughed. "Hell hath no fury. Rose was fighting a losing battle from the moment I laid eyes on you. Shall we be proper? Shall we proceed to the Hofbrau, where I can ask your brother for his sister's hand?"

Julie straightened to her full five feet one. She spoke as Wilma Lindquist would have spoken.

"We will proceed to the Hofbrau, and I shall *tell* Jared!"

She picked Gigi up and took Ben's arm, and they walked toward Broadway.

Do your eyes get tired easily?

LARGER TYPE MAKES THE DIFFERENCE!

™ Look for the books with Lancer's trademark symbol—the books that put the pleasure back in your reading at low paperback prices.

Each book is set in larger, clearer type—at least 30 percent larger than usual Each book is carefully printed on scientifically tinted nonglare paper for better contrast and less eyestrain.

All Lancer E-Z Read Editions are current books carefully selected to guarantee the best in modern reading.

E-Z READ™

ABOUT JUNE WETHERELL:

"June Wetherell establishes herself in the upper brackets... written with artistry and insight." –SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

"The sense of history in the making is always present, without obscuring the drive of the narrative... it has the unmistakable dignity of art." –NEW YORK TIMES

"Realistic and forceful." –COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

And now Miss Wetherell turns her talents to a Gothic with a difference. OPAL STREET is a brilliant portrait of New York in 1870, and a frightened young girl who had to uncover past wrongs and build a life for herself in a dangerous, colorful present.

This Lancer E-Z Read Edition is printed on specially tinted paper and set in large, clear type. All the Lancer E-Z Read Editions are carefully selected to guarantee the best in modern reading.

A LANCER BOOK • COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED
Cover printed in the U.S.A.